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## The Role of Emotional Overcontrol in Acceptance of Counselor Training Feedback

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## The Role of Emotional Overcontrol in Acceptance of Counselor Training Feedback

### Abstract

Effective feedback is a critical component of counselor training. The degree to which a recipient is able or willing to accept feedback can impact learning and skill development significantly. Recognizing individual trait differences can help the field of counseling understand feedback receptivity in counseling students. This study examined the possible relationship between feedback receptivity and the individual trait of emotional overcontrol. Results indicate that overcontrol accounted for variance in scores on a measure of feedback receptivity in a sample of counseling students, suggesting that individual trait differences meaningfully affect feedback receptivity.

### Keywords

emotional overcontrol, feedback, feedback receptivity, counselor training, counselor education, RO DBT

### Author's Notes

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Feedback is an important element of student learning in counseling programs. Students use their instructors' and supervisors' knowledge to learn competent, ethical care and to adopt the identity of a professional counselor. Counselor educators and supervisors are required to provide ongoing feedback to students and to evaluate both didactic and clinical work (American Counseling Association, 2014). Receiving feedback, however, can be a challenging experience for students and can create conflicts in educational settings. Difficulty accepting feedback is a leading cause of student remediation in counseling programs (Henderson & Dufrene, 2013).

Much counselor supervision literature focuses on the methods with which supervisors communicate feedback (e.g., Borders et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2008) and the degree to which supervisees like or accept the way feedback is transmitted (e.g., Duffey et al., 2016; Trepal et al., 2010). This literature emphasizes the importance of delivering feedback in a manner likely to satisfy the recipient. However, it must be recognized that feedback is a dyadic process, in which both sender and receiver play active roles (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010). An overemphasis on delivery suggests that feedback reception is the speaker's responsibility. In other words, if a student chooses not to listen to feedback, the implication is that the instructor simply did not deliver the information in a satisfactory manner. However, research suggests that other mechanisms may be at play in this situation, namely openness to feedback and individual traits (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010; London and Smither, 2002). This study explores the concept of feedback, how it relates to counselor training, and how Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy (RO DBT) may help to explain counseling students' reception of feedback.

### **Feedback Receptivity**

In counselor education, teachers serve as instructors, mentors, and gatekeepers, tasked to protect the profession from students who may be unfit to work with clients. Counselor educators

must provide regular feedback to students about their work and professional development in order to help students achieve competency and ethically enter the profession (American Counseling Association, 2014). Feedback is critical to the learning process (Al-Hattami, 2019; Finn & Metcalfe, 2010) and has become a focal point in educational research. Researchers have established that how recipients hear and process feedback has a critical role in the outcome of feedback, including whether recipients use feedback to improve their performance (Rasheed et al., 2015). Feedback that does not align with recipients' self-perception may simply be disregarded as unhelpful or inaccurate (Brett & Atwater, 2001).

Feedback can take many forms, including restructuring the recipient's understanding, providing correct information to counter a factual error, directing the recipient toward a course of study or inquiry, or offering alternative data or perspectives (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback is considered *positive* when the information provided supports or validates the recipient's thinking, behavior, or task performance. *Critical* feedback addresses problematic behaviors or inaccurate understandings, with a goal of changing the recipient's behavior or knowledge base (Wahesh et al., 2017). Geddes and Linnehan (1996) examined the dimensions of positive and critical feedback, and the results suggested that critical feedback might be a more complex cognitive experience, perhaps requiring more processing time, attention, and effort. Positive feedback may also be evaluated differently and is likely to be interpreted by the recipient as more accurate (Brett & Atwater, 2001).

The cognitive structures related to feedback receptivity also appear to be connected to attentional focus. Feedback may affect the recipient's behavior by changing the locus of attention (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Feedback has been found to direct the recipient's attention to one of three types of process: task learning, task motivation, or metatask processes. Task-learning

processes relate to new skill development, while task motivation pertains to interest and goal achievement. Metatask processes relate to emotion; when attention is directed to this area, the feedback recipient engages in affective processes such as evaluating the self, assessing the feedback giver, and considering the task within a broader meaning or context. Individuals with higher anxiety have been found to be more likely to respond to feedback by shifting their attention away from tasks and toward metatask processes that focus on themselves (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Feedback is generally ineffective for learning when the recipient directs attention away from task-learning processes and toward metatask processes (King, 2015). When a feedback recipient perceives a gap between their own performance and the feedback, “the discrepancy can be eliminated by changing behavior to change the future feedback, by changing the standard so it matches the present feedback, by rejecting the feedback, or by escaping the situation (physically or mentally) that signals discrepancy” (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, pp. 259–260). When metatask processes are activated, such as by critical feedback, the recipient might try to reduce the perceived threat toward themselves by abandoning the task or attempting to restore a positive sense of self by rejecting the feedback or the feedback giver (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

The emotionally charged nature of feedback challenges not only recipients, but also those responsible for delivering feedback. In a laboratory setting, subjects assigned to the supervisor role changed their appraisal of supervisees when they learned that they needed to deliver feedback in person; the valence of the feedback became more positive, especially if the supervisor attributed poor performance to the subordinate’s ability instead of to their effort (Ilgen & Knowlton, 1980). Individuals giving feedback may change or withhold information due to worry about hurting the recipient’s feelings (Hoffman et al., 2005) or inciting a negative response (Ladany & Melincoff, 1999). The discomfort with delivering critical feedback is sometimes countered with tips for

carefully maneuvering through recipients' defenses (Letting, 1992), but research has suggested that the focus on "proper" timing, specificity, and frequency of feedback may not be based on reliable constructs (Price et al., 2010).

Students often perceive feedback as a short-term intervention for the purposes of justifying grades or improving the next assignment, whereas teachers are more likely to focus on pedagogical design elements, such as feedback timing, and to view feedback as serving the long-term development of the student (Dawson et al., 2019; Price et al., 2010). Students and teachers differ in the degree to which they believe students have a responsibility within the feedback process. Although many educators also overlook the role of students in accepting feedback, few students report thinking about themselves as being accountable for making the feedback process effective (Dawson et al., 2019). Teachers often provide formative feedback that students may overlook as they put more importance on the final grade (Yorke, 2003). Feedback is not useful, however, unless meaning is made by the recipient and action is taken (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

If students in counselor training programs react emotionally to feedback, potentially directing attention away from learning and toward the self, and if instructors and supervisors have difficulty delivering feedback, then there may be a cyclical interaction that is not conducive to learning. Misaligned expectations about the purpose of feedback may also contribute to an ineffective environment. As such, a focus on proper feedback delivery may be insufficient. Individual differences are emerging as an important theme in understanding feedback receptivity.

### **Feedback Orientation**

The research on feedback orientation offers a means of conceptualizing the importance of individual traits. Feedback orientation was defined by London and Smither (2002) as "an individual's overall receptivity to feedback, including comfort with feedback, tendency to

seek feedback and process it mindfully, and the likelihood of acting on the feedback to guide behavior change and performance improvement” (p. 81). That is, someone with strong feedback orientation will value and integrate feedback, while someone with weak feedback orientation may be resistant to or ignore feedback (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010). Feedback orientation is considered a relatively stable trait, although Linderbaum and Levy (2010) believed that this orientation is subject to change and influence. If an individual’s feedback orientation affects classroom learning, and if this trait is subject to change, then this construct could prove important in the counselor training environment.

More elemental traits, such as biology, might also account for some individual differences in feedback receptivity. Emerging research on the topics of biotemperament and feedback orientation offers new perspectives on the dyadic process of feedback. An inhibited temperament, characterized by rigidity and resistance to new information, may be a feature in feedback receptivity (Lynch, 2018a). RO DBT may offer a useful perspective on the feedback exchange process within counselor education. RO DBT provides a lens for understanding feedback receptivity and the biotemperamental features that may impair openness.

### **Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy**

If individual differences like feedback orientation and attitude about the meaning of feedback influence feedback receptivity, then these differences are likely to affect behavior in the training environment. RO DBT can be used as a theoretical framework to explore these concepts. RO DBT is a counseling model and biopsychosocial theory of human behavior that emphasizes the importance of cognitive flexibility, openness to new experience, and connection to others. The target population are those with the individual trait of emotional overcontrol (OC), characterized by excessive, inhibitive self-control. Four features of maladaptive OC are targeted for specific

behavioral change: low receptivity and openness, low flexible control, inhibited emotional expression, and low social connectedness and intimacy (Lynch, 2018a).

Temperamental factors related to these OC features are believed to be reinforced within an individual's environment, resulting in patterns of rigidity. Of particular interest for feedback receptivity are the features of low receptivity and openness and low flexible control. Low receptivity and openness presents as resistance to new ideas or to changing one's mind. Low flexible control means that the individual struggles to make choices other than OC and may be unable to adapt their behavior to the needs of an environment (Lynch, 2018a).

Receiving, processing, and accepting feedback can be an emotional experience. Individuals differ significantly, however, in the degree to which they manage or control emotions (Lynch, 2018a), and this difference could affect feedback receptivity. Some of these differences can arise from styles of biotemperament. Inhibited temperament is characterized by increased fear reactions in response to novel stimuli (Claus et al., 2015), and has been associated with negative emotionality (Degnan et al, 2010) and increased risk for the development of social anxiety later in life (White et al., 2011). Some individuals with an inhibited temperament will adopt coping strategies such as experiential avoidance and emotional control to try to manage anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed (Lynch, 2018a). Temperament, if a relevant variable to feedback receptivity, will inevitably arise in the training environment.

Although emotional regulation may be a productive classroom behavior, the ability to regulate emotion is different than the tendency toward emotional OC. Emotional regulation pertains to the ability to attend to one's own emotional experiences and adjust the intensity of the emotion and its expression to adapt to the situation; regulation can mean creating, increasing, decreasing, or sustaining intensity. Control, however, is about restraint (Cole et al., 1994). Control

is not about calibrating one's emotions for maximum benefit, but about inhibiting emotions. Emotional control is often a habitual response, shaped by early relationship templates, experiences, and societal rewards and consequences (Cole et al., 1994; Lynch et al., 2001).

Control becomes maladaptive when an individual becomes rigid and situationally inflexible. Such individuals may appear emotionally shut down, closed to relationships, and, most importantly to the present inquiry, resistant to change or new information from the environment. This inflexible control has been linked to low feedback receptivity (Lynch, 2018a). OC is associated with low distress tolerance (Jeffries et al., 2016) and is believed to be a coping strategy for distress (Lynch, 2018a). Researchers, however, have identified that suppression is an ineffective mechanism for managing uncomfortable emotions, and attempts to control emotional expression may ultimately result in increased distress (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; Tull et al., 2010). As a result, OC individuals may respond to critical feedback by blocking external displays of emotion while internally recoiling and shutting down (Lynch, 2018a).

OC individuals are likely to react to critical feedback with anxious arousal and attempts to block the information, rejecting feedback almost immediately (Lynch, 2018a; Lynch et al., 2015). RO DBT researchers have identified two common OC mindsets in response to critical feedback: *fixed mind* (characterized by the belief that change is unnecessary because the individual already has all information needed) and *fatalistic mind* (characterized by the belief that change is unnecessary because it is impossible or there is no correct answer available). Both mindsets serve to block unwanted feedback by dismissing any possible benefits of the new information (Lynch, 2018b).

Behaviorally, OC individuals have been observed to block unwanted feedback using social signals intended to dissuade the feedback giver. Termed *don't-hurt-me* behavior in the RO DBT

literature, this signals that the individual is too fragile or upset to receive feedback, conveying that the feedback provider is causing harm and behaving inappropriately. A don't-hurt-me response might look like a student lowering their eyes, covering their face, or sinking into their chair in a defeated posture. Another response, *pushback* behavior, may consist of either verbal or nonverbal behavior that communicates a subtle or veiled threat or demand, meant to signal to the person providing feedback that there will be unpleasant consequences for their actions. Pushback behaviors might look like glaring; flat or nonresponsive facial expressions, which likely cause discomfort for the other person; smirking or scoffing; or argumentative statements, which may be concealed with a "joking" or half-hearted delivery, meant to provide plausible deniability if the behavior is called out (Lynch, 2018a).

### **Purpose**

The trait of OC can serve as a lens for evaluating feedback receptivity and the individual differences that may appear within the population of counseling students. The current study was conducted to explore the possible relationship between student emotional OC and feedback receptivity in the counselor training environment. The following research question was posed: What is the relationship between counseling student emotional control and accepting feedback within the classroom setting?

### **Method**

This study was conducted utilizing a quantitative design, with several open-ended prompts used to add explanatory data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Data consisted of self-report survey responses. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Antioch University Seattle. Prior to data collection, an a priori power analysis was conducted in using G\*Power 3.1.9.2 (Faul et al., 2009). Based on the values of four predictor variables in regression analysis with a

moderate effect size and power level of .95, 74 participants were required to successfully run the analysis.

### **Recruitment and Participants**

The target population for this study was students enrolled at the master's level in counselor training programs. Participants were recruited via e-mail listservs (e.g., CESNET, COUNSGRADS, and RO-DBT-listserv), a posted flyer at the American Counseling Association conference, and outreach to the counseling department program chairs and coordinators of 114 counseling graduate schools in the United States. Survey participation was incentivized with the chance to win one of five \$25 gift cards.

The total number of complete surveys was 133. Participants ranged in age from 21- to 62-years-old, with a mean age of 32.33 years ( $SD = 10.14$ ). The sample was composed of 101 White students, 11 Black or African American students, six students of mixed racial identity, five Asian or Asian American students, three Hispanic or Latinx students, one student who marked "other," and six individuals who left the answer blank or marked "prefer not to answer." The sample was predominantly female ( $n = 114$ ), followed by male ( $n = 13$ ), nonbinary ( $n = 2$ ), and individuals who left this answer blank or marked "prefer not to answer" ( $n = 4$ ).

Participants were asked to identify the approximate number of months that they had been a student in their counselor training program; answers ranged from 1 to 96 months ( $M = 18.11$ ,  $SD = 14.28$ ; median = 15). Among participants, 117 stated that their program was Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited, five reported that their program was not CACREP accredited, and 11 marked unsure or did not answer.

### **Survey and Instruments**

The survey tool consisted of four instruments. Three measures were related to OC: the Personal Need for Structure (PNS), the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II), and the OC Trait Rating Scale (OC-TRS). One measure was related to feedback in the classroom setting (the Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale [IFOS]). All other questions were generated by the lead author.

### ***Personal Need for Structure***

The PNS was developed by Thompson et al. (1992), and was revalidated and modified for construct validity by Neuberg and Newsom (1993). Neuberg and Newsom adapted the 12-item instrument to an 11-item instrument, utilizing a 6-item Likert scale with answers ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Scores range from 11 to 66. A higher score indicates a higher need for structure. The 11-item PNS was used in the survey for this study. In the present sample, the internal reliability was .825, above that found in the Neuberg and Newsom sample.

### ***Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II***

The AAQ-II (Bond et al., 2011) is a 7-item scale measuring the single factor of psychological inflexibility. The AAQ-II uses a 7-point Likert scale with answers ranging from “never true” to “always true.” A higher score indicates a higher degree of psychological inflexibility. The possible range in scores is seven to 49. Initial scale testing reported a mean of 21.41, SD 7.97 (Bond et al., 2011). In the present study, internal reliability was .886, consistent with Bond et al.’s (2011) results.

### ***OC-Trait Rating Scale***

The OC-TRS (Seretis et al., 2015) is an unpublished 24-item tool using a 6-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from “disagree completely” to “completely agree.” The OC-TRS was designed to measure eight domains of the OC trait: low openness to experience, low affiliation

needs, negative emotionality, low positive emotionality, emotion expression inhibition, high moral certitude, compulsive striving, and high detail-focused processing. A higher score indicates a higher degree of alignment with the OC trait. The score range is 24 to 144. In a pilot study of 253 university students, the OC-TRS had an internal reliability rating of .85 (R. Hemple, personal communication, September 4, 2018). In the present study, internal reliability was .752.

### ***Author-Generated Questions: Problematic OC Behaviors***

In addition, participants were asked to address items specific to typical maladaptive OC behaviors and cognitions that are likely to occur in response to feedback. Eight Likert-scale items were developed by the lead author, based on the OC literature, and adjusted with the assistance of an RO DBT content expert to better reflect OC behaviors as they have been operationalized by the RO DBT training organization. These eight items, intended to capture pushback and don't-hurt-me behaviors as well as fixed mind and fatalistic mind attitudes, were grouped together as *problematic OC behaviors*, and analysis was conducted to examine the validity of these items. Internal reliability within the present sample was acceptable at .717. Confirmatory factor analysis supported a two-factor model. A rotated component matrix suggested that the questions did not, as intended, fully evaluate for the factors of fixed mind, fatalistic mind, don't-hurt-me behavior, and pushback behavior, however, the analysis suggested that internalized states (emotions and thoughts) and externalized behaviors clustered together in a two-factor model. See Appendix A for items and factor loading.

### ***Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale***

The IFOS (King et al., 2009) consists of a 27-item instrument measuring four factors related to accepting and processing feedback within the classroom setting: feedback utility (the perception that feedback is useful and valuable for improving academic performance), feedback

sensitivity (the degree to which the student feels threatened or intimidated by corrective feedback), feedback confidentiality (concerns related to receiving feedback publicly or privately), and feedback retention (the degree to which the feedback was remembered or retained for future use). All four subscales were included in the survey. In the present sample, internal reliability was acceptable for the feedback retention (.676), confidentiality (.821), sensitivity (.873), and utility (.718) subscales. King et al. (2009) identified a similarly low reliability score on the measure of retention (.69) in an initial study and believed this may be attributable to the low number of items on this subscale.

### ***Additional Questions***

Study participants were given the opportunity to respond to three open-ended questions, for the purpose of providing explanatory data. These questions invited participants to describe a positive experience of receiving feedback, to describe a negative experience of receiving feedback, and to offer advice to teachers and supervisors about giving feedback. Demographic information was also collected.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative analysis was performed in SPSS Statistics version 25. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used for comparative analyses. The researchers used regression analysis to examine the degree to which individual measures of OC might account for scores on the IFOS, as well as to assess the possible influence of control variables (e.g., age or time in program).

The qualitative data from the open-ended prompts was examined using thematic analysis (TA), as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). TA can be used cross-theoretically, allowing for flexibility (Clarke & Braun, 2018) and making it a good choice for exploring newer counseling

theories like RO DBT. To help preserve the intentions of the TA method as a qualitative research process and the integrity of the thematic data, qualitative analysis was conducted before quantitative data was reviewed. The data was read in its entirety several times before coding began. Initial codes were identified and then clustered into themes. Themes were then revised to ensure that each theme described a relevant concept without overlapping or excluding important data. Themes were then defined based on RO DBT theory (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

## **Results**

The first research question examined the relationship between counseling student emotional control and accepting feedback within the classroom setting. Regression analysis was conducted to explore the possible confounding variables of participant age and the number of months of training that participants had completed at the time of the survey. Results indicate that age was not significantly related to feedback retention or feedback utility. However, age was significantly related to the variables of confidentiality ( $R^2 = .045, \beta = -.230, p < .05$ ) and feedback sensitivity ( $R^2 = .048, \beta = -.235, p < .05$ ), suggesting that older participants might be less concerned about privacy in the feedback process and less likely to feel threatened by feedback. Completed training time did not relate significantly to feedback confidentiality, feedback retention, or feedback sensitivity. Approximately 3.5% of the variance associated with utility was accounted for by months of training ( $R^2 = .035, \beta = -.207, p < .05$ ), indicating that students who have been in training longer may believe that feedback is less useful than students newer to training. Controlling for age and months of completed training indicated that the predictor variables related to OC better explained the variance in scores on measures related to feedback

Correlational analyses of variables related to OC (as measured by the PNS, AAQ-II, OC-TRS, and problematic OC behaviors) and variables related to feedback from instructors (as

measured by IFOS subscales) generated the data in Table 1. Significant but weak correlations existed between the need for structure (PNS) and the variables of feedback confidentiality and feedback retention. Results indicate that a higher need for structure correlated with better feedback retention and a higher desire for privacy. There was a significant, modest correlation between need for structure and feedback sensitivity, indicating that more need for structure correlated with a higher sense of threat and embarrassment when receiving corrective feedback.

Psychological inflexibility (AAQ-II) also correlated significantly, but weakly, with feedback retention and feedback confidentiality. Results of the analysis indicate that higher scores on the measure of psychological inflexibility correlated with an increased desire for privacy while receiving feedback and a decrease in feedback retention. A modest, significant correlation also existed between psychological inflexibility and feedback sensitivity, indicating that individuals who endorsed more rigidity and adherence to personal rules were also more likely to report embarrassment with feedback.

Scores on the OC-TRS had significant correlations with each of the variables pertaining to instructor feedback, all in the weak-to-modest range. These results indicate that higher scores on the OC-TRS correlated with lower feedback retention, higher desires for confidentiality, higher sensitivity to embarrassment, and a lower belief that feedback is useful.

The problematic OC behavior questions correlated significantly, though weakly, with the variables of feedback retention and feedback confidentiality, indicating that the presence of more feedback-blocking behavior correlated with decreased feedback retention and an increased desire for privacy in the feedback process. Problematic OC behaviors also correlated modestly with feedback sensitivity, indicating that individuals engaging in more feedback-blocking behavior were more likely to feel threatened and embarrassed by corrective feedback.

**Table 1***Pearson Correlational Analysis of OC Measures and IFOS Subscales*

Feedback Variables (IFOS)	Feedback Retention <sup>1</sup>	Feedback Confidentiality	Feedback Sensitivity	Feedback Utility
PNS	-.173* (.046)	.260** (.003)	.322** (.000)	.140 (.108)
AAQ-II	.162 (.062)	.219* (.011)	.430** (.000)	-.037 (.673)
OC-TRS	.239** (.006)	.352** (.000)	.351** (.000)	-.176* (.043)
Problematic OC Behavior	.251** (.004)	.228** (.008)	.549** (.000)	-.059 (.449)

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed). <sup>1</sup>This scale is reverse scored; a higher score indicates a lower report of feedback retention. PNS = Personal Need for Structure; AAQ-II = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II; OC-TRS = OC-Trait Rating Scale.

Regression analysis results appear in Table 2 (coefficients) and Table 3 (model). All  $R^2$  values are adjusted unless otherwise noted. Results indicate low to moderate Beta values when psychological inflexibility, OC-trait, need for structure, and problematic OC behavior were used as predictors of feedback sensitivity, utility, retention, and confidentiality. Problematic OC behavior, however, did result in a Beta score of .417 ( $p < .01$ ) when related to feedback sensitivity, suggesting that behavioral indicators like correcting the feedback giver or shutting down moderately predicted the degree to which the feedback recipient feels threatened or embarrassed by feedback. Overall model fit indicated that the predictor variables are a moderate fit for the variable of feedback sensitivity ( $R^2 = .343$ ,  $F(4,128) = 18.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but a poor fit for feedback utility ( $R^2 = .052$ ,  $F(4,128) = 2.79$ ,  $p < .05$ ), retention ( $R^2 = .134$ ,  $F(4,128) = 6.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and confidentiality ( $R^2 = .127$ ,  $F(4,128) = 5.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 2***Coefficients Table: Measures of OC and Instructor Feedback Variables*

Scale		Constant	Psychological Inflexibility	OC-Trait	Need for Structure	Problematic OC Behavior
Sensitivity						
	Beta		.208*	-.037	.179*	.417**
	Sig.	.729	.031	.700	.018	.000
Utility						
	Beta		.127	-.305**	.211*	-.029
	Sig.	.000	.271	.009	.020	.777
Retention						
	Beta		-.044	.242*	-.296**	.233*
	Sig.	.007	.688	.030	.001	.018
Confidentiality						
	Beta		-.035	.298**	.164	.058
	Sig.	.054	.749	.008	.058	.552

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 3**

*Model Table: Measures of OC and Instructor Feedback Variables*

Scale	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of the Estimate	Sig.
Sensitivity	.603	.363	.343**	5.98	.000
Utility	.283	.080	.052*	2.676	.029
Retention	.400	.160	.134**	1.875	.000
Confidentiality	.392	.153	.127**	3.097	.000

*Note:* Predictor variables included Psychological Inflexibility, OC-Trait, Need for Structure, Problematic OC Behavior.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ . Degrees of freedom = 128.

The data analysis for question one supports the interpretation that students who rate higher on scales of emotional OC will express less interest in teacher feedback and more negativity toward receiving feedback from teachers. The variable most closely associated with use of feedback (utility) correlated significantly only with the OC-trait variable, indicating an association between OC (as measured by the OC-TRS) and a lower belief in the value of feedback. The variables most specific to OC theory (as defined by RO-DBT, OC-trait and problematic OC behavior) correlated with decreased feedback retention, which suggests less interest in, and later, less access to, teacher

feedback. All variables associated with OC correlated positively with feedback sensitivity, suggesting increased negative feeling toward disconfirming instructor feedback. Together, the OC variables accounted for 8.6% of variance of utility, 10.7% of retention, 18.7% of confidentiality, and 30.3% of sensitivity scores.

### **Qualitative Findings**

A total of 107 participants responded to at least one open-ended prompt, providing a total of 312 qualitative data extracts. The RO DBT theoretical framework that relationships (termed “tribe” in RO DBT literature) are a basic human need was utilized to interpret results. A total of nine themes were identified: tribal security, acceptance and validation, invitation to join, tribal insecurity, rejection/detachment, barrier to join, no experience of negative feedback or all feedback is positive, no experience of positive feedback, and technique.

Positive experiences of receiving feedback were primarily related to experiences that enhanced or preserved the individual’s status within the group (*tribal security*), experiences that validated or improved the individual’s status with the teacher or supervisor (*acceptance and validation*), and experiences that, while not necessarily relational, provided or enhanced access to the counseling profession or learning environment (*invitation to join*). An example of tribal security is the 24-year-old female who stated, “After leading a group counseling session, I received positive feedback from the class TA and my classmates. It was wonderful to hear what I was doing well. It helped to boost my confidence for future experiences.” Tribal security did not inherently require all validating feedback. A statement from a 45-year-old female captured tribal security by saying:

An assignment for my internship was to record a session with a client. The session was viewed by my cohort and faculty supervisor. After everyone viewed, I received feedback with things I did well and strategies for improvement from both peers and supervisor.

A 29-year-old female shared an example of acceptance and validation by stating “I like when [a] professor was understanding after going through a life crisis.” Another example of acceptance and validation from a 36-year-old (no gender identified) is:

I had a professor give me good positive and constructive feedback that directly relates to the type of work I'm going to with the degree I'm studying for. I like how that professor tailored the feedback specifically to me and my professional goals. That tells me that the professor is genuinely interested in my success.

An invitation to join was exemplified by a 35-year-old female student who described a positive feedback experience by stating, “I'm not the strongest writer and my professor suggested to me that spending more time in the writing center would be invaluable to my improvement. He was right.” Another participant, 27F, included the element of having enough time to adequately address the corrective feedback: “When I got back my assignment with constructive feedback from my instructor. I was given sufficient time and opportunity to work on the mistakes and improve on the quality of my work.”

Negative experiences with the feedback process were primarily related to moments in which an individual felt that their status within the group was diminished or compromised by public rejection (*tribal insecurity*), experiences of poor private relationships with supervisors or teachers (*rejection/detachment*), and experiences in which an individual felt blocked from accessing the counseling or training environment (*barrier to join*). A 29-year-old female participant gave the following example of tribal insecurity to describe a negative feedback

experience: “When an instructor took me to the back of the classroom after class, but still in earshot of others, and told me that my homework was immature and that if I was struggling with the program I could leave.” Another participant, 47F, stated “I felt like my instructor picked on me during class when I was unable to give feedback in a particular format.”

An example of a rejection/detachment experience came from a 24-year-old female: “During my undergrad, I had a professor respond to an emotional paper I wrote by saying that it was 'not even a big deal' and that I was wrong to be emotional about the death of my mentor.” A 48-year-old female student shared that a negative experience was “Feedback in the form of criticism rather than pointing out ways I can enhance or strengthen my work.”

A 36-year-old who preferred not to identify their gender expressed the barrier to join theme by highlighting what they felt was unfair feedback: “I once had a professor give me some nonsense, boo-hoo feedback. That professor had hurt feelings that I didn't agree on a particular topic. Too bad... get over it. Be a professional” Another barrier to join example from a 35-year-old female captures the struggle of not knowing what to do with feedback:

I received a paper with very minimal feedback and was concerned that I was not on the right track. I expressed it to my professor and they [directed] me to the feedback attached to the paper, it left me confused.

Responses related to the third open-ended question (advice for teachers and supervisors) repeated many of the themes from the first prompt. For example, a 28-year-old female student recommended “Don't single people out in a group to give corrective feedback, please! Do it privately if you can!” A 24-year-old female added “It is really nice to hear positive affirmations on the feedback as well, even if there are some negative feedback, putting things in a positive perspective makes me more receptive.” Notably, however, 13 participants brought up the

importance of teachers and supervisors recognizing their own power and privilege within the training environment, whereas this theme was not mentioned in prompt 1 pertaining to positive feedback experiences. A 47-year-old female stated “Remember the power imbalance between instructors and students. No matter how old we are, we still feel the gulf separating us.” A 51-year-old male student added

I would tell them [faculty] to never lose sight of where they have their roots. Being in leadership is never easy; However, it is always important to consider the individuals' perspective. Furthermore, one should never say or do to others anything they would not like said or done to them

This result suggests that acknowledgment of power and privilege may be an unmet need in instructional feedback interactions. Race may be a factor as well, as noted by a 29-year-old female student: “Ask if race is an issue because of the power dynamics.”

Participants provided examples of preferred strategies for counselor educators in prompt three. They included specific techniques (written vs. verbal, mixing positive and negative feedback or not mixing, etc.). Comments included “Provide more feedback in writing” (51-year-old male), “provide feedback in a timely fashion and include feedback on content and formatting” (53-year-old female), and “Keep it brief, to the point and if needed give examples” (34-year-old female). Participants frequently contradicted each other, suggesting that feedback technique preferences are highly individual. What was consistent, however, was the value placed on positive relationships in the feedback process.

A theme throughout all three prompts was an external locus of control, in that participants almost universally attributed the positivity or negativity of a feedback experience to the teacher or

supervisor providing the feedback. For example, a 53-year-old female described how feedback affected her work ethic by stating

The professor took weeks to grade or provide feedback on weekly assignments. Not knowing if I was on track with my assignments, I started to not work as hard. I recall thinking if it is not important enough for timely feedback then I dont need to work as hard

### **Discussion**

The variable of OC trait itself, as measured by the OC-TRS, correlated with decreased feedback retention, an increased desire for confidentiality, an increased sensitivity to feedback, and a decreased belief in the utility of feedback. These results are congruent with RO DBT research, which has identified OC people as less open and receptive to information, more cognitively rigid, and more sensitive to perceived social threats (Lynch, 2018a). The results suggest that OC may appear in the counselor training environment and affect the response of some students to instructor feedback, potentially creating a barrier to feedback receptivity. Results indicate that a moderate amount of variance in scores pertaining to feedback sensitivity could be explained by variables related to emotional OC. This result suggests that individual differences among students do relate meaningfully to feedback receptivity, indicating that instructors and supervisors alone cannot ensure a positive or effective feedback experience for a counseling student and cannot bear sole responsibility for the feedback process.

The attribution of feedback success or failure to the feedback giver, as indicated in the qualitative data, is consistent with research suggesting that students view the feedback process more as a transaction and less as a tool for personal growth (Price et al., 2010) and as a process for which the student themselves has little responsibility (Dawson et al., 2019). The attribution of blame to the other party for negative feedback experiences suggests that rejecting the feedback or

feedback giver to resolve a discrepancy between one's desired view of self and disconfirming feedback is a common response in counselor training environments. The presence of external attribution for a negative experience can also be an indicator that metatask processes have been activated (King, 2015), suggesting a possible shift away from task learning.

Despite the prevalence of other-focused attributions, the predictor variables of need for structure, psychological inflexibility, the OC trait (as measured by the OC-TRS), and problematic OC behavior did explain about 30% of the variance in feedback sensitivity scores. This suggests that individual traits are meaningful in determining the degree to which a feedback experience results in embarrassment or a threat response. The data supports the idea that feedback interactions should be viewed as a shared responsibility between recipient and provider to ensure that feedback is taken in and utilized.

The element of relationship is important in the interpretation of results. The qualitative data extracts made clear that relationship-enhancing experiences of feedback were positive, and rejecting, shaming, or dismissing experiences of feedback were negative. A research focus on feedback delivery technique and timing (e.g., Borders et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2008) might be misguided unless the relational element is considered. Qualitative data extracts related to delivery technique contained many contradictions but the desire for positive relationship, respect, and individual focus was consistent and clear.

## **Implications**

Counselor educators and supervisors could use this study to reconceptualize the feedback process. Feedback can be considered a relationally based experience, in which both the feedback giver and recipient are responsible for the effectiveness of the exchange. Counselor educators could discuss this concept with students early in their training programs and both students and

supervisors could share the responsibility of maintaining relationships in which feedback exchanges, and the students' reactions, are openly discussed. Additionally, resistance to feedback, or evidence that feedback is not being utilized, could be examined by both the student and the educator as a possible indication of the student struggling to manage emotions within the context of the educational setting and relationships with faculty.

Counselor educators and supervisors can also consider that individual student differences, such as biotemperamental traits like OC, are likely to affect the feedback process. A respectful, open relationship between faculty and student is likely to meaningfully influence this process, as is recognition on the part of the student that listening to feedback calmly and openly is their personal responsibility. Counseling students, who learn about concepts like mindfulness, differentiation, and nervous system regulation, should be well-equipped to approach this task. Educators could also direct their own training efforts toward comfort with sharing disconfirming feedback directly and focusing on relationship quality, rather than learning feedback-giving strategies which emphasize softening or timing feedback to have less emotional effect on the listener.

Through orienting students to the importance of feedback and feedback receptivity, as well as the likelihood that individual differences affect feedback receptivity, students could be challenged to consider an internal locus of control in regards to their own learning. This could meaningfully change the manner in which students participate in their own training. Students who continue to struggle may also benefit from some of the strategies taught in the RO DBT model for enhancing openness. This toolkit could be made available to students before resistance to feedback becomes a matter of remediation.

## **Limitations**

The design was limited by several factors, including that the OC-TRS is still under development, the problematic OC behavior measure was not validated and normed prior to use, and the possibility that a disproportionate number of OC people (compared to undercontrolled people) completed the entire survey due to its length, given that OC people may be more likely to endure a tedious task (Lynch, 2018a). Results are also limited by the small response size for the survey, a primarily White and female sample, and small effect sizes within the data.

### **Future Research**

Future research could explore additional individual differences that may account for some of the variance in feedback receptivity. Other individual traits or student behaviors, such as personality traits or personal values, could provide more information on the relational elements of the feedback process and provide further data on the manner in which feedback processes are coconstructed. The individual traits and behaviors of educators could also be studied to explore this phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the relationship between measures of emotional OC and feedback receptivity within the counselor training environment. Measures of instructional feedback receptivity in the present sample were significantly related to measures of OC, indicating that this individual difference between students is an important component of feedback exchanges in counselor education. The results of this study indicate that feedback is a mutual process and that counselor educators cannot be solely responsible for whether students listen to, make meaning of, and use feedback.



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### Appendix A: Rotated Component Matrix of the Problematic OC Behavior Questions

	Component	
	1	2
When I get feedback about my work, I can move on quickly because I have already worked out the problem, know the answer, or have done the necessary self-reflection about the issue being discussed.	.766	
When I get corrective feedback, I feel hopeless about ever being able to do it right.	.749	
I get frustrated with feedback because it seems that my supervisor or teacher just doesn't understand that I can't do what it is that they want.	<b>.768</b>	.308
When I get feedback, it feels like the evaluator is commenting about who I am as a person.	-.606	
When I get negative feedback, I think that I visibly look ashamed or shut down.		.781
I can get other people to back off or leave me alone with just my facial expression.		.716
People need to give me their feedback gently, or else I will be too sad or upset to take it in.	.346	<b>.691</b>
I have to correct others because they give me feedback without understanding me first.	.540	.556

*Note.* Factor loadings > .3 difference are in boldface, indicating a significantly stronger loading to that component. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.