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Keywords

gatekeeping, psychological safety, counselor educators, counselors-in-training, CES preparation

Author's Notes

This research study was partially supported by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Research Grant, and the North Atlantic Region Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Research Grant.

**Gatekeeping and Psychological Safety:
Qualitative Analysis of Early-Career Counselor Educators**

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Abstract

Using transcendental phenomenology, researchers investigated the gatekeeping experiences of 17 early-career counselor educators working in CACREP programs. Guided by the research question: How do early-career counselor education faculty members perceive their role as a gatekeeper and balance this role, while creating a supportive learning environment for their graduate students? Three primary themes emerged: gatekeeping is challenging, psychological safety is created through intentionality, and gatekeeping and psychological safety interact along a continuum. Implications for supporting counselor educators are provided.

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Gatekeeping and Psychological Safety:

Qualitative Analysis of Early-Career Counselor Educators

Counselor educators (CEs) hold distinct and unique roles inside and outside the classroom for counselors-in-training (CIT) (Kimball et al., 2019). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs 2016 standards (CACREP; 2015) require counselor educators and counselor education programs to develop and assess CITs in several areas including, but not limited to, interpersonal communication/reflective skills (2.F.5), social/cultural competency (2.F.2), and cognitive complexity/personal self-awareness (4.G). For the CIT, developing personal self-awareness occurs in a supportive learning environment where interpersonal risks can be taken for interpersonal growth (Edmondson, 1999; 2019). Edmondson (1999) was one of the first researchers to suggest that a supportive learning environment encompasses a construct called *psychological safety*, which allows an individual to take interpersonal risks without fear of retribution. CEs must foster psychological safety in and out of the classroom for the CIT because self-awareness affects competency in both clinical and academic settings (Baldwin, 2018).

This responsibility can become complex for the CE when self-awareness is not sufficiently developed in the CIT (Kimball et al., 2019). When interpersonal risk fails to result in personal development, the CE is tasked with gatekeeping responsibilities. This gatekeeping role requires the CE to ethically monitor the competency of the CIT. If deficiencies exist, a formal remediation plan may need to occur (Henderson, 2018). DeLorenzi (2018) urges CEs to refrain from initiating the formal gatekeeping processes until all diligent efforts of mentorship and informal remediation have been exhausted. Even so, CEs reportedly struggle with balancing the role of psychological safety with the role of gatekeeping (Kimball et al., 2019).

A supportive learning environment is a catalyst and foundation for psychological safety. Specifically in counselor education, creating a supportive learning environment result in CITs developing the ability to reflect on their thoughts, biases, and attitudes (Peña, 2019). Edmondson (1999; 2019) exerts that the process of learning requires consistent reflection, feedback, correction, and discussion and psychological safety provides implicit confidence from CEs for students. This confidence implies that students will not be punished or embarrassed when errors occur, allowing for an environment where “people are comfortable being themselves” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). Because counseling research is lacking in this area, our literature review led us to Johnson et al. (2020), from the medical education literature, who discovered a “meta feedback loop” (p. 567), where the student is constantly assessing the educator’s reaction to their attempts to take risks and grow. The more an educator showed comfort and support to the student, the more willing the student was to engage confidently and authentically. Extending Johnson et al.’s (2020) work to CEs and CITs, it would appear that the presence of psychological safety allows the CITs to begin developing their counselor identity, which occurs when professional training and personal characteristics are integrated within the context of the profession (Granello & Young, 2018). McCaughan and Hill (2015) argue that counselor identity is likely to include the personal and professional dispositions of flexibility, emotional stability, self-awareness, and self-monitoring through personal maturity.

When a CIT exhibits major deficiencies in professional dispositions or clinical skills, the American Counseling Association’s *Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014) and the 2016 CACREP Standards require CEs and supervisors to implement gatekeeping measures. According to Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen (2010) CEs “cannot avoid their role as gatekeepers of the counseling profession” (p. 412). The term *gatekeeping* was adopted by the counseling profession

to define the process by which CEs aim to ensure that only competent counselors enter the profession (Homrich, 2018). Gatekeeping, i.e., evaluating the CIT's fitness for the field, begins upon admission to a program (McCaughan & Hill, 2015), and continues through coursework (Baldwin, 2018), experiential classes (Dean et al., 2018), and post-degree residency (DeLorenzi, 2018). Homrich (2018) explains that CEs and clinical supervisors may hold liability for any harm that might be caused by the CIT. Furthermore, Homrich (2018) explains that universities can also be liable for graduating students who do not demonstrate competencies in their areas counseling specialties. Although only one court case was found, the state of Louisiana held Louisiana Tech University liable when the institution failed to, "ensure that its graduates are competent in the area in which the certificate or degree is bestowed" (The Chronical of Higher Education, 1994, p. A6). In our review of the literature, it is clear that gatekeeping responsibilities are shared among the student, faculty, supervisor, and department/educational institution.

Balancing psychological safety with gatekeeping responsibilities can create a complex set of challenges for CEs. Previous literature indicates CEs may struggle with supporting and nurturing the development of the counselor identity in the CIT while also providing corrective feedback to protect future clients (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). CEs report often feeling unprepared and ill-equipped to balance creating psychological safety to promote self-awareness in CITs with upholding ethical and legal mandates related to gatekeeping (Kimball et al., 2019). To date, no research exists exploring how CEs view the convergence of these roles; therefore, as a starting point, the researchers explored the experiences of CEs regarding the reconciliation of their roles as gatekeepers and creators of psychological safety. The research question guiding our study is: *How do early-career counselor education faculty members perceive their role as a*

gatekeeper and balance this role while creating a supportive learning environment for their graduate students?

Method

To explore the lived experiences of early-career CEs, we employed a phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994). Our choice of design was informed by the research question, our theoretical frame of social constructivism (Miles et al., 2018), and research from Johnson et al. (2020) that examined psychological safety and feedback between educators and learners. Applying Moustakas' (1994) methods of transcendental phenomenology, we developed a textural-structural description of early-career counselors' lived experiences. This methodological approach allowed us to investigate both participants' subjective understanding and the objective nature of the phenomenon under investigation. The inquiry process that guided our research included epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). Our research question allowed us to focus on participants' perceptions of their direct experience navigating student-faculty challenges by using methods grounded in transcendental phenomenology to extract meaning from the phenomenon.

Researchers

Our research team emerged from shared personal experiences as early-career counselor educators with varying degrees of experience navigating student-faculty challenges in and out of the classroom, as well as a shared interest in demystifying the process for current and future counseling faculty. The five researchers comprising our team all hold CACREP-accredited doctorate degrees in Counselor Education and Supervision and currently teach in three CACREP-accredited masters programs. At the time of data collection, four of us were in our first year of teaching whereas the second author was in her fourth year. We are all licensed

counselors with experience ranging from three to 18 years. The first author initiated the project after having been exposed to different programs and policies for working with CITs across different institutions. The second author, our methodologist, had prior knowledge of conducting qualitative research and expertise in counseling ethics related to gatekeeping. The second, third, and fifth authors work at the same private institution, whereas authors one and four are employed at separate public institutions. The third author served as our auditor, whereas authors four and five assisted in data collection and analysis. The first, second, and third authors were significantly involved in writing the manuscript. Following Moustakas' (1994) guidelines for transcendental phenomenology required our team to act intentionally throughout the research process, letting go of beliefs and judgments that could bias what is being examined during the interview process. The influence of our individual beliefs, experiences, and perspectives on data interpretation, i.e. reflexivity, was recognized and discussed openly throughout the research process. For example, when an interviewer and participant shared an experience, the interviewer noted this occurrence on paper, verbally acknowledged it to the participant, then processed it with the research team after the interview.

Participants

We utilized purposeful sampling when conducting this research consistent with Palinkas et al.'s (2015) guidance. In accordance with Suri's (2011) recommendation, we identified a population that was knowledgeable and had rich insights regarding the topic of interest. Criterion sampling was used to recruit early-career counselor educators (less than three years – post-doctoral full-time employment; guided by Levitt and Hermon's (2009) research on career experiences of counselor educators). All participants worked in CACREP-accredited counseling programs across the US. After receiving institutional review board approval, a request-for-

participation letter was posted to CESNET, a counselor education listserv. The letter included a Qualtrics link allowing potential participants to consent to the study, and requesting they complete a short demographic questionnaire. Participants were contacted via e-mail to schedule the interviews and were provided with the interview questions. Participants had the option of entering a raffle to win one of five \$50 gift cards.

We received 24 eligible responses, but only 17 respondents agreed to participate in the interviews. Participants averaged 1.7 years ($SD = .8$ years) as counselor educators, with the sample comprised of 15 U.S. citizens and two International faculty. Other demographics included: sex (Female: 8; Male: 9); average age 37 years ($SD = 5$ years); ethnicity/ race (White: 10; Black or African American: 2; Asian: 4; 2 or more: 1); sexual orientation (Heterosexual/Straight: 11; Gay: 3; Bisexual: 1; Prefer not to answer: 1; Queer: 1). All five regions of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) were represented (NARACES: 4, NCACES: 4; RMACES: 2; SACES: 6; WACES: 1), suggesting this was a geographically diverse sample.

Procedure

The research question and extant literature informed the development of the semi-structured interview protocol, consistent with Castillo-Montoya's (2016) recommendation. An initial draft of the interview questions was sent to an expert researcher on early-career counselor educators for review. She assessed the protocol for appropriateness and suggested revisions, accordingly. The final version contained the following questions, delivered in a semi-structured interview: (1) As a counselor educator, how would you define/describe your role as a gatekeeper? (2) As a counselor educator, how would you define/describe your responsibility to promote psychological safety in the classroom? (3) How do you see gatekeeping and

psychological safety complimenting each other? And (4) How do you see gatekeeping and psychological safety clashing?

Once the participants were identified, the lead researcher assigned each team member a group of participants to contact and interview. Attention was given to the research team to ensure each interviewer understood the constructs asked by the interview questions before engaging in the interview process. The team also examined and came to a consensus regarding the role of the interviewer prior to actual interviews to minimize differences in interviewing styles. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom, over a three-week period, averaged 50 minutes in length, and were transcribed by the research team. All participants agreed to record the interview, and member-checking, which was completed after the final analysis of themes.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were de-identified prior to data analysis by using participant-selected pseudonyms. Each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym, which was used throughout. According to Moustakas (1994) that included epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Epoché, according to Moustakas, involves preparing oneself to discover new knowledge by examining an experience as if it were being had for the first time, while also bracketing one's prejudices and predispositions. Having a research team allowed us to check each other's biases as we constructed questions and initiated and engaged in the interviewing process.

The coding and data analysis process followed thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). This was done in keeping with similar qualitative research by Johnson et al. (2020). Our methodologist, the second author, with experience in qualitative research was chosen from the team to complete the initial analysis and provide guidance on the data analysis

process. During the first stage, the methodologist read each transcript twice, in alphabetical order according to the pseudonym, taking notes on what was observed, while also engaging in bracketing through journaling. During the second reading, initial saturation was established at the 15th interview. Each interview was examined individually during the first reading and then as a whole during the second reading. Once immersed in the data, the methodologist highlighted each transcript for data relevant to the research question. In stage two, each interview was coded individually and then as a whole. Complete coding was used, where all data relevant to the question were highlighted (Braun & Clark, 2013). Most of the data required multiple codes to capture the essence based on the richness of the data. The methodologist developed a coding framework, using a table to organize commonly used words and phrases. After initial coding and data extraction was completed, five transcripts were coded independently by each researcher/author, then all five researchers met to discuss and create an initial set of codes. Following this process, the twelve remaining transcripts were independently coded and then discussed in pairs (four by authors one and two; four by authors two and four; four by authors two and five), using and modifying the initial coding framework. A final coding framework was agreed on by consensus based on team discussions, which contained operational definitions and codes with similar properties grouped together. In addition, Braun and Clarke's (n.d.) 15-point checklist was used for a thorough and accurate thematic analysis that resulted in a concise description of the thematic nature of the phenomenon.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies in phenomenological research were employed to ensure trustworthiness including thick descriptions, triangulation, reflexivity through journaling, and member checking (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). Based on the structure provided, we developed thick

descriptions by using, procedural adherence, and continuous memo writing. Triangulation occurred across data sources and team members. Drawing on procedural guidelines outlined by Moustakas (1994), authors one, two, four, and five coded the interviews, looking for consistent themes across transcripts. The third author served as an auditor to ensure consistency and representation across all transcripts and to check the coders' interpretations and conclusions. During the coding process, to promote reflexivity, the coders discussed themes that emerged, while checking each other for potential bias (bracketing); triangulation was used to gain perspectives from differing theoretical lenses. In the present research, potential biases included a shared worldview on gatekeeping and prior experiences and scholarship with gatekeeping. Participants conducted member checks of the final themes, subthemes, and accompanying verbatims, following the final round of coding. We received feedback from five participants, all of whom confirmed that the textural-structural description was in keeping with their experiences. We remained immersed in the data analysis process until all data were accounted for and no new findings emerged (saturation), i.e., four rounds of coding and synthesis. Our conclusions were supported by rich, contextualized, and verbatim responses from participants.

Findings

After data analysis, three primary themes emerged: 1) gatekeeping is challenging; 2) psychological safety is created through intentionality; and 3) gatekeeping and psychological safety interact along a continuum.

Theme 1: Gatekeeping is challenging

When participants were asked to describe their role as a gatekeeper, most commented on challenges and some focused more on the CIT developmental process. Sonny commented on the

challenging nature of her role as a gatekeeper due to how different courses highlight select skills (academic/dispositional vs clinical) during different phases of the program:

... it could be working with a student who is in their first two semesters, [who] has not had any problems, and now something emerges. So there's kind of the potential defensiveness [from the student] of, well, no one's mentioned it to me before ... Well, [the CIT] might've not had any difficulties or any concerns or issues the first six classes because things were different. The classes were different, you are different. We're not stagnant, we're all evolving and changing [which can make gatekeeping a challenge].

Brandon focused more on how the counseling profession itself is misunderstood and students often underestimate what will be needed to learn the profession:

it's expansive ... we have people that may be entering the profession for the first time ... people that come in thinking they know what counseling is, and thinking that it might be very easy to do because it's a relational profession ... And with gatekeeping, recognizing those students who don't understand or recognize that counseling is not a black and white linear profession, that it's often ambiguous ... [counseling] is an art and a science

Alex shared how student confusion about the role of a CE makes gatekeeping more difficult:

... when they [CITs] don't know how to get out of their own way whether it's because of their own biases ... their own mental health issues ... sometimes what they need from me is a counselor. And my role as a gatekeeper doesn't necessarily mean that I can be the counselor for them because that's not my role ...

Several participants agreed that it was important for CEs to have clear boundaries and not venture into roles like “personal counselor”. Linda summed up the complexity of the process “there are multiple factors that I will take into consideration.”

Most participants considered the structural challenges in gatekeeping including, how differences in CEs' approaches to gatekeeping complicates the process, and the challenges when the gatekeeping role is not well defined. Alex noted that challenges arose when faculty participate in gatekeeping at various levels:

... my role as gatekeeper has been full of conflict ... I've been seen as the hard ass in my department, and there are a lot of questions and layers around that. One, involves me being a Faculty of Color. Second, involving me being the youngest faculty in the department. And third, I'm the only pre-tenured faculty left. So, in many ways these factors have made [gatekeeping] more challenging... [and when we [faculty]] ... produce conflicting messages it really says to CITs, 'Oh, well, Dr. [Alex] isn't really validated in his thinking. Or maybe he's just too strict. Or maybe he's too rigid.' That's when I want to stress the fact that I describe my role as a gatekeeper as challenging.

In sum, varied faculty perspectives and participation in gatekeeping created challenges. Role ambiguity, intentionally or unintentionally communicated to students, leads to difficulties for CEs. Terrence shared, challenges arose when the process and standards of gatekeeping were ambiguous and not clearly defined by the institution. He stated that CEs often had the freedom to consider gatekeeping needs as individual and without strict guidelines, which was positive but also lead to challenges "... [when the] gatekeeping processes were ... unstructured, there wasn't a clear process, it was ... a case-by-case kind of consideration [that was challenging] ..."

Whether it involved challenges addressing student development or institutional influences, Ashlee summed up many of the participants' statements on gatekeeping "it is complex." Even with the difficulties that arose from gatekeeping, all participants reported that gatekeeping was a necessary and ethical part of being a CE.

Theme 2: Psychological safety is created through intentionality

Participants viewed psychological safety as a necessary role of CEs. Participants shared that psychological safety was promoted through intentional a) communication, b) clear boundaries, c) modeling, d) efforts to address situations immediately, and e) acceptance that it takes time.

Communication

Intentional efforts to establish and maintain open communication offered an opportunity to support CITs. Linda shared how *communication* supported the development of psychological safety: "... [I] encourage CITs to come to my office, or send me emails through which we may communicate with each other, either personally or professionally ..."

Clear Boundaries

Faculty highlighted specific ways through which they believed boundaries allowed for the development of psychological safety in CITs. Sloan observed that *clear boundaries* promoted a sense of psychological safety: "... we had classroom rules, and we had expectations ... it was ongoing, adaptive honesty around what it meant to be in this... collaborative [learning] process." Brandon captured both *intentional communication and clear boundaries*:

... I promote it [psychological safety] by explaining the difference between psychological safety and topic-driven or topic-specific discomfort. You will be uncomfortable in class ... it'll be confrontational in a manner where one cannot hide from their verbal and nonverbal body language ... It's possible in terms of promoting psychological safety, to *coddle* ... [but] we're not in a therapeutic relationship ... with a student.

Modeling

Modeling is foundational in counselor training. Sloan discussed *modeling* as an important part of providing psychological safety, and identified two characteristics important to modeling:

... [I need] to be able to engage in *cultural humility* and say, I don't know what I don't know. But I'm willing to sit across from you [the CIT] and ... take another perspective and be *empathic* towards your experience ... providing that psychological safety ... being vulnerable ... and being open to that experience ...”

Efforts to Address Situations Immediately

Psychological safety is dependent upon time-sensitive feedback. Sloan highlighted the importance of *addressing situations immediately*, “... [when] something doesn't feel good, I address it immediately... I feel like [this] allows CITs to feel safe ...”

Acceptance that it Takes Time

As demonstrated by the five other subthemes, promoting psychological safety is multifaceted and requires time. For Paul, building psychological safety took *time*: “... that's a challenge, right? That doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen in one class ...”

Paul seemed to summarize most of the subthemes:

... [In order to] create an environment that encourages honesty, risk-taking, and both intimate contact with others but also with oneself... [T]he environment in and out the classroom in day-to-day relationships is important as we look at our student interactions; that whole person integration within the classroom experience is fundamental.

For all the participants, specific strategies were employed to promote psychological safety in the classroom. Even though the approaches were somewhat varied, participants agreed that psychological safety had to be intentionally developed. Because all the participants endorsed both gatekeeping and psychological safety as part of a counselor educator's duties, the answer to

the next question took on more importance: Is it possible to balance gatekeeping and psychological safety and if so, how does that happen?

Theme 3: Gatekeeping and psychological safety interact along a continuum

Considering the roles of gatekeeping and psychological safety, participants endorsed the view that these two roles *interact along a continuum*. The continuum is experienced in the roles *clashing* or *complementing* each other, and when complemented, *protection* occurs. Most participants communicated that gatekeeping and psychological safety operated differently depending on the needs of the CITs. When psychological safety and gatekeeping functioned in balance, participants saw the two roles complementing each other, on the other hand, when participants identified a need to gravitate towards one end of the continuum over the other, they perceived the two roles clashing.

Participants shared perspectives on the two roles *clashing* when one side of the continuum is overemphasized. Alex commented, "...it's not that I see those roles as mutually exclusive, I believe they're related... but I do think they can clash more often than not." Alex also observed that indiscriminate psychological safety might backfire and be a roadblock to CIT growth:

... if I start to comfort CITs in their fragility, I send a variety of different messages. I allow them to be complicit, I say, "It's okay for them to be wallowing in their *fragility*." And leave them with no accountability.

From this perspective, over-engaging in psychological safety became a disservice to CITs and allowed them to proceed in the program without addressing areas of needed growth.

Several participants focused on how CITs' development contributed to the two roles clashing. Sloan shared the clash can occur when "... CITs are not willing to grow or when there

isn't flexibility... there's rigid thinking ...” Simon added that the two roles clashed when CITs did not meet minimal standards but there was a desire to support the CIT, “...I [the CE] like them as a person, but they are just not meeting the standards, and we [CEs] have an ethical responsibility to [current and future] clients ...” In both instances, CIT growth had to be prioritized over continued psychological safety, therefore, gatekeeping became the focus.

Other participants focused more on how the two roles clashed due to the method of gatekeeping. Ashlee mentioned that growth-oriented feedback, may be perceived as clashing with psychological safety: “... if I'm giving feedback ... CITs might feel... unsupported ... And I could see, potentially, my CITs feeling like sometimes feedback is not representing psychological safety, but it's just going to have to happen.” Participants agreed that gatekeeping is needed, regardless of CIT perception. CEs must gatekeep, but clashes might be minimized by giving each role equal attention.

Participants seemed to agree that when psychological safety and gatekeeping were utilized in tandem, the two roles *complemented* each other. Psychological safety sets the foundation for gatekeeping to be effective whereas gatekeeping promotes increased psychological safety. Simon noted, “if you have psychological safety, it makes your job as a gatekeeper easier.” Furthermore, Alex stated that an ideal CE “... can be empathic and humanistic and at the same time confront CITs and hold them accountable.” Participants also emphasized how gatekeeping and psychological safety need to operate together for the best results. Milton noted, “If we're able to address some of these issues with CITs, helping them feel free to share ... [psychological safety] can complement [gatekeeping] if they feel supported through our efforts.” Terrence agreed:

... creating safety is really important; you might not see certain things come up for the CITs that they're working through or trying to navigate ... unless you provide that safe place for them to actually disclose it. In order for us to effectively gatekeep ... we have to create a safe environment for the CIT to show themselves so we can truly evaluate.

As participants engaged in examining the complementing roles of psychological safety with gatekeeping, the complexity of balancing the roles emerged. Sonny stated:

how do you balance between rigor and high expectations and maintaining... psychological safety ... we [CEs] need both. But we have to be able to embrace the autonomy and address individual differences and uniqueness' [of CITs] ... how do you balance ... having expectations, having security and also being able to embrace those individual differences, different ideas, different experiences that people have ... [it] is challenging to do in the classroom or even just within a program.

Terrence reflected on the complexity of balancing the two roles when the need to gatekeep emerges from providing psychological safety:

... if you create that safe environment, you don't want to ... penalize CITs for sharing something that they're struggling with ... because you create a safe environment ... there should be a process where they're supported ... so they're ready to work with clients ... I was fully aware of the challenge and support ... paradigm ... challenging CITs to grow developmentally ... it was hard to know where the line was ... How much do I challenge? How much do I support them through their challenges?

Even though participants acknowledge the complexity of balancing the two, they provided insights on ways to establish balance. Ashlee reflected on how intentionally addressing the two roles with CITs promoted their complementary relationship, "[I] intentionally tried to tie

the idea of psychological safety in my classroom to my gatekeeping role so that my CITs and I are both very clear about how those [roles] connect more than they clash.”

Under the subtheme of complementing, participants shared how this can be achieved through *transparency* and *clear definitions of terminologies* with the result being *protection*.

Regarding *transparency*, Paul shared:

I think it's important to notify the CITs about my role so they're clear, not surprised ...

Then it's not, you're [CE] attacking my safety within the classroom. I knew this was a role you had, and I understand it's necessary to intervene ...

Terrence further commented on the importance of transparency, i.e., informing and explaining the gatekeeping process to CITs throughout their counseling program experience:

... you're being completely transparent of the process, which I think in turn creates more safety ... So that there isn't any shame or mystery or ambiguity, if something does come up [for CITs] they know that they'll be supported ... and it won't be like they're going to be in trouble ... But they know that they'll enter a process. It's a guideline for them and that guideline makes them feel safer.

An additional factor of balance was *clear definitions of terminologies*. Sonny shared:

having the appropriate language to talk about [the roles] ... I used the word gatekeeping when I'm giving feedback to students so that they ... know what [gatekeeping] means and what my responsibilities are ...if someone was to observe me, they would hear the language I'm using and hopefully ... understand this is part of [the CIT's] development.

A result of psychological safety and gatekeeping complementing each other is *protection*.

Sonny highlighted “... the role of the gatekeeper is kind of protecting, but so was the responsibility of growing and psychological safety; it's also protecting the students as well... that

protection piece is similar.” Milton shared that when gatekeeping is bypassed, even for one student, it negatively impacts the ability of other CITs to grow. A lack of psychological safety can infiltrate the entire program, “... if a CIT needs to not be in the program anymore, then that can help the rest of the [CITs in the] program grow ... I think [the roles] complement ...” Ashlee agreed that balancing both roles provided protection and safety not only for CIT’s but their clients and communities, “... at the end of the day, it's my job to make sure that everybody in my classroom [CITs], and all the clients in the community that are going to be served by [them] ... are going to be safe.”

All participants agreed on the responsibility of balancing gatekeeping and psychological safety fall on the CE. Sloan concluded, “...with both roles, there is a lot of investment that the faculty have to have ... both of them [are] complicated and exhausting.” Even with the difficulties in balancing the two roles, most participants agreed that it was worth the energy it took to figure out how to balance gatekeeping and psychological safety, for students, the profession, clients, communities, and themselves.

Discussion

Extant literature documents the challenges CEs experience around gatekeeping and providing supportive feedback to CITs while facilitating their counselor identity development and protecting future clients (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Kimball et al., 2019). However, empirical research is lacking regarding understanding CEs’ dual roles of gatekeeping and psychological safety. To address this gap in the counselor education literature, we focused on the ways in which CEs perceive their roles as gatekeepers while fulfilling this role and providing psychological safety in and out of the classroom. Analysis of the narratives led us to identify three themes related to the roles of CEs interacting with CITs: 1) gatekeeping is challenging; 2)

psychological safety is created through intentionality; and 3) gatekeeping and psychological safety interact along a continuum. It should be noted that our findings related to the roles of CEs are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive.

The theme ‘gatekeeping is challenging’ examined the ways in which CEs described their role and focused on the CITs’ development, CITs’ underestimation of the work and commitment required to become a counselor, and CITs’ confusion of CEs’ role based on operational differences stemming from each CE’s training and experiences. To effectively teach and train CITs, CEs need to create a climate of psychological safety in the classroom and during clinical supervision, while also balancing their role as gatekeepers (Edmonson, 1999; 2019). Ultimately, the gatekeeping role is critically important because it seeks to ensure the welfare of current and future clients who will be served by CITs (ACA, 2014, *F.1.a*; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). CITs may benefit from frequent reminders that gatekeeping is an ongoing process. CEs might also minimize potential CIT confusion regarding the counseling profession and gatekeeping process by clearly communicating program policies, expectations, and guidelines for academic performance and by having all faculty within a department agree to follow the same gatekeeping model (Kimball et al., 2019). By creating an environment of transparency, CEs might be able to minimize some of the challenges of gatekeeping, offering CITs some degree of control regarding their educational and training journey into becoming professional counselors. CEs can lessen CITs' anxiety so they can more intentionally focus on the acquisition of counseling knowledge, clinical skills, and dispositions (Johnson et al., 2020).

The next theme, ‘psychological safety is created through intentionality’, identified the value of CEs role in fostering a safe environment for CITs to learn and develop inter- and intra-personally. It is important for CEs and CITs to note that psychological safety, like the therapeutic

relationship, takes time to develop. In addition, psychological safety requires CEs to invite open communication with CITs, outline clear student-faculty boundaries, and model cultural humility while addressing CIT situations (i.e., related to CITs knowledge, clinical skills, and dispositions) immediately. By facilitating psychological safety, CEs seem to mirror the supportive learning environment noted by previous research, allowing CITs to develop the ability to develop self-awareness and reflect on their attitudes, biases, and thoughts (Peña, 2019). Our findings also align with Edmondson's (1999; 2019) work, where psychological safety, intentionally created by CEs, reframes failure "as a source of valuable data, but [CEs] must understand and communicate [to CITs] that learning only happens when there's enough psychological safety to dig into failure's lessons" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 16). CITs need to know that there is a reason for risk-taking, i.e., to motivate their desire for growth. Without an intentional discussion about '*why what they do matters*,' CITs may not develop internal motivation for interpersonal growth. Simply put, CITs need to grow to ensure their future clients are safe, and this is best facilitated through psychological safety created by the CE, which takes time.

The final theme, 'gatekeeping and psychological safety interact along a continuum' identified the dynamic role of the CE, which is often dependent on the situation and needs of the CIT. Congruent with Kimball et al.'s (2019) work, participants shared that gatekeeping and psychological safety often complement each other but can also sometimes 'clash'. Here, clash refers to the CE's state of internal struggle, not a state of conflict between gatekeeping and psychological safety, a concept supported by Barlow and Coleman (2003). Gatekeeping and psychological safety may clash in the classroom when one CIT's lack of development goes unchecked (i.e., not gatekept), thereby disrupting the learning environment (i.e., psychological safety) for the rest of the class. Therefore, CEs are encouraged to address occurrences of

incivility by CITs in the classroom that threaten the climate of safety we are seeking to create and in doing so, facilitate continued support for CITs to reflect on their own biases and attitudes for developmental growth (Peña, 2019). This suggests that when used together, gatekeeping and psychological safety can create a more productive learning environment. In sum, we believe both gatekeeping and psychological safety requires care. Although more research is needed in this area, we postulate that if CEs invest in the psychological safety end of the continuum as CITs enter the counseling program, they will save time and energy on the gatekeeping end of the continuum as time passes. When the role of the CE is balanced along the gatekeeping–psychological safety continuum, there is a greater likelihood for learner-centered feedback to occur between the CE and CITs. In turn, CEs can be more attuned to the structural power they hold over CITs in all interactions (in and out of the classroom) and better facilitate CITs risk-taking, growth, and overall counselor development (Johnson et al., 2020).

In our conversations with participants, most did not explicitly discuss multiculturalism and its role in psychological safety and gatekeeping, yet it is important to recognize the implicit importance of this factor. For CEs and supervisors to be effectively creating psychological safety for CITs, psychological safety should be balanced with identity safety, i.e., ensuring the student is secure to maintain their unique identity in the classroom without fear that they will be devalued (Buckley & Foldy, 2010). Furthermore, CEs need to consider the unique intersectional and multicultural identities of students as they evaluate, provide feedback to, and encourage CITs (DeLorenzi, 2018). A CIT's behavior could be related to their lived experiences and multicultural factors (DeLorenzi, 2018).

Limitations

Though we believe our study provides an effective overview of the experiences of a select group of CEs concerning the interactions between gatekeeping and psychological safety,

our research has several limitations. The first set of limitations relates to researcher effects. Accounting for potential researcher bias is important. The researchers' own preconceptions towards the subject matter, due to their histories as CEs and unique experiences as gatekeepers, could have influenced the interpretation of the narratives, regardless of our best efforts concerning bracketing and reflexivity. Another limitation of the study is that more than one interviewer conducted the interviews, thereby potentially threatening the validity and reliability of our findings. However, as was stated in the methods, the research team worked to ensure that each interviewer understood the constructs associated with the interview questions. The team also examined and came to a consensus regarding the role of the interviewer prior to participating in actual interviews to minimize differences in interviewing styles. The second set of limitations concerns procedural issues. We only recruited CEs with knowledge of gatekeeping (as outlined by CACREP) who utilized the CESNET listserv, thus not accounting for all CEs. Additionally, our sample lacked diversity, disproportionately reflecting the experiences of White counselor educators. Finally, social desirability factors may have influenced participants' answers to the questions in the interviews. Offering an incentive (five \$50 gift cards) to participants could have also influenced participation and our overall findings.

Implications for Counselor Educators

CEs in this study identify *feedback* (i.e., formative and summative evaluations) as imperative to supporting CITs inter- and intra-personal development. Formative evaluations give the CIT ongoing feedback to support their learning and are tailored to their developmental level. Summative evaluations, such as evaluations from site supervisors at the end of the internship experience, are opportunities to evaluate benchmark skills for a CIT, identifying both strengths and areas for growth (DeLorenzi, 2018). Although most of the CEs in this study agreed that the gatekeeping process is a challenge, all CEs recognized their ethical responsibility to provide this

feedback and engage the student in both informal and formal gatekeeping processes (Homrich, 2018; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). This corroborates previous literature indicating that intentional dialogue with the CIT regarding feedback is important for the CE to determine whether the CIT understood the criteria, help the CIT apply the feedback, and encourage the CIT to engage in ongoing self-assessment (Fink, 2013). CEs would benefit from providing psychoeducational programs to CITs in efforts to build and/or strengthen their emotional intelligence in relation to their overall well-being (Harrichand et al., 2017) as they engage in self-assessments and feedback. If CEs consider the intersectional and multicultural identities of CITs and make space for these important parts of the CITs' identity in conversations, their consideration may result in increased self-discovery and vulnerability.

Counseling involves working with vulnerable people, i.e., mentally, emotionally, and relationally, therefore, the risk of harm through negligence or abuse is high (Remely & Herlihy, 2019). The gatekeeping responsibility, particularly for CITs who fall short of meeting competencies, falls on faculty and supervisors to protect future clients, the community, and the counseling profession from the CIT in question (Kimball et al., 2019). In keeping with this responsibility, another implication of this research is the importance of CEs *engaging in empathetic feedback* when offering correction, which is better facilitated when we ourselves create and engage in self-care practices, including self-compassion (Harrichand et al., 2021b). When feedback is given with clear empathy, the CITs may better hear the message the CE is delivering and implement the new behavior suggested (Fink, 2013). As Alex stated, “[feedback] can be empathic and humanistic and at the same time confront CITs and hold them accountable.” Sloan agreed that it is important to be “*empathic towards [the] experience.*” The empathy displayed by the CE will affect what Johnson et al. (2020) refer to as the “meta feedback loop,”

in which the student assesses the CE's reaction to empathy, allowing for what Paul calls "honest risk-taking" from the CIT. One way to engage in empathetic feedback is to identify a strength observed in the CIT, connecting the strength to a growth area related to an upcoming task, then giving the assigned task for the CIT to complete (e.g., an excellent writer may be tasked to write their next research paper on culturally sensitive treatments). CEs may help CITs see a need for change, creating an opportunity for growth to occur based on their feedback (Bradley et al., 2013). Additionally, CEs can intentionally integrate self-care and wellness practices as they work with CITs to minimize burnout (Harrichand et al., 2021a).

Finally, CEs are encouraged to *establish specific benchmarks for CITs*. Many of the CEs in this study agreed that part of being intentional requires transparency. When the CE and the graduate program have clear expectations, guidelines can help students feel safe because "there isn't any shame or mystery or ambiguity" (Terrance, *participant*) in the corrective feedback. Edmondson (1999; 2019) discusses how clear expectations can foster internal confidence because students know that a part of the learning process is receiving constant feedback, and they will not be punished or embarrassed when errors occur. The CEs in this study agree with Edmondson in that the complexities of the gatekeeping process can be ameliorated by consistent, ongoing communication from the start of the program until the student is no longer under supervision. Subsequently, when formal gatekeeping processes are required, the CE can feel confident that they exhausted all efforts of informal remediation (DeLorenzi, 2018).

Recommendations for Future Research

In addition to offering useful information, our study also illuminates paths for further inquiry. One such path could be exploring psychological safety and gatekeeping from the student's perspective, as these phenomena have not yet been documented in the counselor

education literature. Qualitative studies that investigate how the students' perspective influences their personal and professional development can inform CEs practices to better balance these two constructs. Similar research could also explore gatekeeping and psychological safety practices by experienced (tenured and/or promoted) faculty to document how well these align with our current findings while noting what differences might exist. Considering our participants' emphasis on gatekeeping and psychological safety as two interactive constructs, future research may benefit from the development of a scale that measures how well CEs perceive their ability to balance both constructs. These future studies could inform more intentional preparation of future CEs.

Conclusion

The roles, i.e., gatekeeping and psychological safety, of CEs are central to the development of the CIT. Gatekeeping can be viewed as a challenging, yet necessary task for CEs. If gatekeeping can be balanced with the creation of psychological safety, learner-centered feedback and growth in CITs is possible. This study explored participants' perceptions of the importance of intentionally creating a climate of psychological safety within the classroom and supervision space while balancing the role of gatekeeping to protect other CITs and future clients. CEs could benefit from the consideration that these two constructs can exist along a continuum. This conceptualization could ensure that proper training and vetting are occurring for the CIT. Ultimately, the goal of CEs is a CIT's development and growth, which is supported through ongoing feedback, clear expectations, and transparency in being a gatekeeper.

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