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A Phenomenological Investigation of Doctoral Students' Gatekeeping Experiences

Shawna M. Corley, Jessica Lloyd-Hazlett, Hope Schuermann, Noel Blessing

Counselor education doctoral students serve as gatekeepers simultaneous to their own training and evaluation. We used transcendental phenomenology to examine the gatekeeping experiences of 15 doctoral students at three programmatic levels. Findings and implications related to two primary themes, (a) precarious positions and power and (b) developing a gatekeeper identity, are discussed.

Keywords: gatekeeping, counselor education, doctoral students, supervision

There is a clear need for further investigations of professional impairment and gatekeeping practices of counselor education programs. A vast majority (92%) of counselor educators report having at least one student with a professional impairment, and training programs dismissed 20% of these students (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013). Gatekeeping is an ethical responsibility of counselors, entailing ongoing monitoring of suitability for professional practice (American Counseling Association (ACA), 2014). At its core, gatekeeping is a mechanism to provide intervention, including facilitating exit from the profession, on behaviors that could threaten client welfare (Foster & McAdams, 2009). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) lists gatekeeping as a national accreditation requirement for both master's and doctoral-level programs. For the purpose of this study, gatekeeping is viewed within the university setting and involves pre- and post-admission evaluation and remediation to monitor students' ongoing fitness for the program and professional field (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010).

Gatekeeping requires counselor educators and supervisors to make developmentally appropriate assessments of student counselors' progress. Faculty evaluations of counselors-in-training occur in

academic (e.g., course grades) and interpersonal contexts; including interactions during supervision in practicum and internships, and interactions in and outside of class (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). As counselor educators-in-training, doctoral students have opportunities to serve in evaluative roles as teaching assistants and supervisors of master's level students (Scarborough, Bernard, & Morse, 2006; Fernando, 2013). As part of these roles, doctoral students hold gatekeeping responsibilities (CACREP, 2016; Limberg et al., 2013). However, the literature has yet to thoroughly explore doctoral students' experiences as gatekeepers (Rapp, Moody, & Stewart, 2018).

Gatekeeping in Counselor Education

The concept of gatekeeping, including benefits and considerations, is documented in counselor education literature. Successful gatekeeping procedures are well defined, clearly understood, and incorporate a team-based approach (Bemak, Epp, & Keys, 1999; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). Gatekeeping should encompass knowledge, skills, and dispositions to practice effectively. However, gatekeeping procedures often lack adequate structure, particularly around admissions protocols, and may not be sufficient to predict

fitness for the field (McCaughan & Hill, 2015). For example, counseling programs face the dilemma of granting entry to students who meet admission criteria and excel academically but may have limitations in their personality, presentation, or psychological health that could impact their ability to perform as a professional counselor (Bemak et al., 1999; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). Following admittance to a program, counselor education faculty may struggle to carry out student remediation plans due to fear of legal consequences (McCaughan & Hill, 2015). Dismissing a student during practicum or internship becomes increasingly challenging, as the student has previously advanced through a large portion of the training curriculum (Bemak et al., 1999). Researchers indicate that while master's students believe faculty members are responsible for intervening, faculty and students are often aware of deficient students within their programs who graduate with no remediation (Foster, Leppma, & Hutchinson, 2014; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006). Negative consequences, such as litigation, student backlash, and disagreement with colleagues or university officials, may deter faculty from responding to gatekeeping concerns (Schuermann, Avent, & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2018). Reluctance to respond to gatekeeping concerns may be more pronounced for doctoral students due to limited professional experience, multiple relationships with faculty and master's students, and limited authority to enact gatekeeping protocols.

Doctoral Students' Gatekeeping Roles

By the nature of their training programs, doctoral students assume the role of gatekeepers. Standards of training as defended by CACREP (2016) require doctoral students to obtain experience in teaching and supervision, within these roles they are expected to fulfill duties specific to gatekeeping; including screening, evaluation, remediation of students/supervisees. This is accomplished by having doctoral students supervise master's students during their practicum experiences. This time serves as an essential component that contributes to doctoral students' sense of growth as supervisors (Nelson, Oliver, & Capps, 2006). Within these gatekeeping roles, the same ethical standards for faculty members, supervisors, and other professionals involved in student counselor preparation apply to doctoral students

(ACA, 2014). Despite these standards, research regarding doctoral students' training and experiences in this area is sparse.

While researchers have addressed doctoral students' identity development (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2013; Frick & Glosoff, 2014; Limberg et al., 2013), gatekeeping as a specific facet of doctoral students' professional training and development is not amply researched. Thus far, researchers exploring gatekeeping concerning doctoral students' experiences as supervisors-in-training. In their study examining experiences of supervisors in training, Gazzola, De Stefano, Theriault, and Audet (2013) found that doctoral students expressed discomfort holding authoritative roles, uncertainty in their ability to judge competence, difficulty managing negative feedback, and difficulty dealing with self-doubt exacerbated by challenges to their credibility. Furthermore, doctoral supervisors-in-training expressed ambivalence about being in the "middle tier" of supervision wherein they are concurrently providing and receiving supervision. These doctoral students also described feeling uncertainty and exclusion from remediation processes (Frick & Glosoff, 2014). While these studies do well to describe doctoral students' experiences of gatekeeping within the context of supervision, there are other roles doctoral students adopt that could expand understanding of the nuances their role as gatekeepers.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the gatekeeping experiences of counselor education doctoral students at various programmatic levels (i.e., first year, second/third year, doctoral candidate). It was imperative to give careful consideration to the programmatic level due to the dearth of research addressing doctoral students' gatekeeping roles and development. Further, while not applied to gatekeeping specifically, extant literature indicates doctoral student development transpires over time and as a result of experiential components (i.e., teaching assistantships, supervision of supervision) put into place by counselor education programs (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Limberg et al., 2013). Including the various levels may enhance the understanding of doctoral students' lived experiences of gatekeeping. Utilizing open-ended interview questions, we elicited descriptions of experiences, learning opportunities, and other formative gatekeeping events. Results from this study deepen

understandings of doctoral student identity development and have implications for strengthening doctoral student gatekeeping practice and professional readiness.

Method

We sought to understand doctoral students' lived experiences as gatekeepers within their counselor education programs, thus used a transcendental phenomenology approach. Phenomenology emphasizes "the individual and collective internal experience for a phenomenon of interest and how participants intentionally and consciously think about their experiences" (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 291). Within the phenomenological framework, we sought to collect individual experiences to form a shared description of the 'what' and 'how' of gatekeeping as a doctoral student. Further, phenomenological researchers seek *epoche* by bracketing their own opinions, theories, and expectations, which permits greater access to participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Transcendental phenomenology, in particular, aims to collect the experiences of participants while consistently assessing and addressing the bias of the researchers, in order to produce a purer and "transcended" description of the researched phenomena (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Due to the researchers' personal experiences as future, current, or former doctoral students in counselor education, the framework of transcendental phenomenology gave the needed structure for identification of biases and preconceived notions, which was a vital part of data analysis. We further explain our exploring and addressing of biases in the Research Team section.

Sampling and Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, we used purposive sampling to recruit study participants. A call for participation was circulated through various counselor education listserves, as well as through colleagues working in counselor education settings. To be included in the study, participants needed to be currently enrolled in a doctoral-level counselor education and supervision program and willing to discuss their gatekeeping experiences. We conceptualized lived gatekeeping

experience to include engagement in formal gatekeeping roles and remedial interventions, as well as doctoral students' ongoing oversight and evaluation of master's students' and peers' fitness for the professional field. We prioritized recruiting participants at different programmatic levels (i.e., first years, second/third years, doctoral candidates). Recommended sample sizes for phenomenological research range from 5 to 25 (Creswell, 2013).

Participants for the current study included 15 doctoral students, four of whom were first years, six were second or third years, and five were doctoral candidates. We ended recruitment at 15 participants because we reached saturation for students in different programmatic levels. Saturation was determined by the recurrent of similar themes across interviews. Participants ranged from 25-47 years of age ($M=34.4$, $SD=8.22$). Association for Counselor Education and Supervision region was included on the demographic form, and our participants were largely from the Southern region ($n=13$), with two from the Rocky Mountain region. Three participants reported full state licensure, ten reported provisional state licensure, and two reported no professional licenses. In addition, all participants reported they were enrolled in a CACREP accredited program. Table 1 provides additional participant demographics, including summaries of participants' teaching, research, and supervision experience in their doctoral programs to date.

Research Team

At the time of the study, the final research team included one doctoral candidate in counselor education (first author), two assistant professors of counselor education (second and third authors), and a clinical mental health master's student (fourth author). One other master's student assisted with interviews and early analysis but was not able to remain on the research team. All members of the research team identified as Caucasian/White and were members of a Hispanic Serving Institution at the time of data collection and analysis. The first author is a doctoral candidate who has had coursework on research, while the second and third author have extensive experience in qualitative research, including coursework, chairing doctoral dissertations and multiple peer-reviewed publications. The second and

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Experience Level

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Standing	Teaching Assistantships	Research Assistantships	Supervision Experience
Beth	41	F	Caucasian	Candidate	3 courses	None	6 semesters
Bill Nye	31	M	Caucasian	Candidate	7 courses	2 semesters	3 semesters
Daisy	47	F	Caucasian	Second Yr.	4 courses	None	5 semesters
Emma	31	F	Caucasian	First Yr.	1 course	1 semester	None
Fred	55	M	Caucasian	Second Yr.	2 courses	4 semesters	1 semester
Haley	25	F	Caucasian	First Yr.	None	2 semesters	None
Heather	31	F	Caucasian	First Yr.	2 courses	1 semester	None
Kaleesi	40	F	Mexican American	Second Yr.	1 course	3 semesters	1 semester
Kay	41	F	Caucasian	Candidate	10 courses	None	6 semesters
Lily	38	F	Caucasian	Candidate	4 courses	3 semesters	4 semesters
Maya	30	F	Jewish/ European	Third Yr.	4 courses	6 semesters	2 semesters
Penny	35	F	Caucasian	First Yr.	None	1 semester	1 semester
Regina George	27	F	Caucasian	Second Yr.	1 course	None	1 semester
Theirry	29	M	African American	Candidate	4 courses	None	2 semesters
Truth Teller	30	F	Asian	Second Yr.	5 courses	None	2 semesters

third author provided mentorship and training on qualitative research throughout the research process.

As part of our bracketing and to reduce bias per transcendental phenomenology (Lopez & Willis, 2005; Moustakas, 1994), we met to discuss our own gatekeeping experiences, information we had received about gatekeeping in our training programs, and biases or expectations we might bring to the research project. Given the composition of our research team, it was also vital that we had ongoing conversations about our collaboration, including multiple relationships and power dynamics. To navigate these dynamics, we decided clear delineation of responsibilities associated with authorship, to rotate order when sharing ideas/feedback, and to regularly check-in with each other about the process. While the composition of our group posed potential challenges, we also felt our project demonstrated strengths, such as the representation of individuals across the spectrum of gatekeeping positions within a counselor education program.

Finally, we utilized an auditor to assist with our data analysis and enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Auditors, who are not part of the research team, are often used in a transcendental phenomenology approach to address any biases of the research team that may show up in the data results (Lopez & Willis, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). Our auditor did this by looking through the notes of the research team from discussions in research meetings on bias and any personal notes written by the researchers, then by reading through the individual transcripts, data analysis, and results. Our auditor was a tenure-track faculty member who assisted with the original conception of this research before relocating. We selected her as an auditor because of her familiarity with the project and with qualitative research.

Data Collection

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol based on a review of gatekeeping literature. Our interview questions included the following: (a)

How do you define gatekeeping, (b) Describe your view of the role of doctoral students as gatekeepers, (c) Tell me about your experience as a gatekeeper while in your doctoral program, (d) Tell me about a time when you were in the role of gatekeeper with a master's level student and describe any challenges or success, (e) Doctoral students often serve in several roles to include being a teaching assistant, research assistant, clinician, and supervisor. Please tell me about how you approach these in regards to your gatekeeper role (f) What experiences in your doctoral program, if any, facilitated (and inhibited) you serving as a gatekeeper, (g) What were pivotal moments in your doctoral program that impacted your understanding and experience of being a gatekeeper, (h) What aspects of your doctoral training program are particularly relevant to shaping your experience as a gatekeeper, and (i) Tell me about your most memorable gatekeeping experience. All members of the research team conducted participant interviews. Depending on participant availability, interviews were conducted in-person, by phone, or via video conferencing. Participants were notified in the informed consent that the interview would take approximately 60 minutes; however, most lasted between 30-45 minutes, with a few that were 20-30 minutes. As several of the participants were still in the early phases of their program and had limited gatekeeping experiences, they gave succinct answers and moved through the interview questions quickly. Though some interviews were brief, the themes and ideas that came out of those interviews were consistent with themes from more extended interviews and consistent with similar programmatic levels. All participants were given the opportunity to add any additional information about their gatekeeping experiences that was not covered through the interview questions at the end of the interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the research team. Participants also completed a brief demographic form.

Data Analysis

We used Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's (1959/1966) phenomenological data analysis. This method includes seven interrelated steps to consider participant transcripts individually and collectively: 1) reflecting and recording our experiences and biases related to doctoral student gatekeeping

throughout data collection and analysis, 2) highlighting significant statements, or horizons, in each transcript (horizontalization), 3) creating themes or clusters of horizons, 4) describing the themes through text and significant statements, 5) structural description through using the textual descriptions and significant statements to describe the context of how participants experienced doctoral student gatekeeping, 6) recording and discussing field observations that took place during interviews, and 7) developing the essence, or a merged textural-structural description of the gatekeeping as a doctoral student phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The first step of reflection on personal experiences related to our study topic was completed during the initial phases of project planning and continued to be a topic of discussion throughout data analysis. For step two, *horizontalization*, or the listing of every unique expression related to participants' experiences, our research team began by reviewing a transcript together to gain consensus on what constitutes a horizon and help the student researchers gain more experience around the method. Once all researchers were comfortable and had a working knowledge of how to identify horizons, we assigned the same transcript to each member of the research team for individual review. We came back together to discuss any questions that emerged during individual coding and to confirm our inter-rater agreement. We continued Step 2 by distributing the remaining transcripts for *horizontalization*. Following the transcript review, we color-coded the participant transcripts and compiled all identified horizons into a single document. As a group, we reviewed this list to eliminate any unclear or redundant statements, yielding a final list of unique horizons, or *invariant constituents*, about the phenomenon. Then, we entered Step 3 of clustering the invariant constituents by thematic groups until all members of the research team agreed upon identified themes.

The next step of data analysis, Step 4, included drafting individual *textual descriptions* of each participant's experience using invariant constituents and themes pertinent to their experience. Textual descriptions aim to capture the meaning and depth of the essence of the experience (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). We then authored a *structural description*, Step 5, of each participant's experience, which identified tensions, multiple meanings, and

variations within textual descriptions. For this step, authors divided up the participant transcripts amongst each other, reviewed the horizons, themes, and textural descriptions to then write the structural description. Once these statements were complete for all participants, the research team met and reviewed, edited, and finalized the structural statements. For Step 6, a review of field observations, the team met and discussed any notes taken during interviews and how those impressions could have influenced data analysis. No biases or observations seemed to influence data analysis, however, so we moved to the last step. Finally, Step 7, we constructed a *combined textual-structural description* for each participant, and from these a composite description that represented the essence of the experience of the participants. Given the nature of our research questions, we also developed individual and composite textural-structural descriptions for participants by programmatic level (i.e., first years, second/third years, candidates). Using the individual and composite textual-structural descriptions, we then re-examined and consolidated our initial themes.

Upon conclusion of Step 7, the researchers granted the auditor access to all of the study documents: IRB forms, interview questionnaire, demographics form, research team discussion notes about bias and the research process, transcripts, analysis, and findings. After careful review, she sent an overview of her review, as well as notes on the individual transcript analyses. Her suggestions included paying attention to the language the participants used in their interviews, re-thinking how we clustered the themes, and representing what the gatekeeping experiences meant to the participants. Her input was greatly valued and assisted in the final representation of our study results.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, or validity in qualitative research, is defined as “the truthfulness of your findings and conclusions based on maximum opportunities to hear participant voices in a particular context” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 192). We utilized several trustworthiness strategies to satisfy these criteria including member checking, triangulation of data sources (i.e., speaking to participants representing varied stages of doctoral study), representing thick

descriptions which encompass a full description of the participants' experience, maintaining an audit trail, and utilizing an external auditor. In addition, our use of transcendental phenomenology and its inherent goal of assessing and addressing bias (i.e. ‘transcending’) served as a trustworthiness strategy (Lopez & Willis, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). We sent the themes and transcripts to all participants for member checking. Ten participants responded and agreed with the findings as presented. The other five participants did not respond to the member-checking request. As previously discussed, our auditor reviewed the raw data and the analysis, then provided feedback about our research process and proposed findings. Based on her feedback, we modified some theme names and reviewed our data to ensure each theme was distinct.

Results

We identified two primary themes and seven sub-themes capturing participants' lived experiences as gatekeepers. Descriptions of themes and sub-themes are provided in the following sections. The participants selected pseudonyms utilized.

Precarious Positions and Power

The first theme, precarious positions and power, related to actual gatekeeping positions held by doctoral students, as well as the consideration of the consequences of this positioning. Specifically, participants discussed a precarious positioning between master's and doctoral students and the unique impact of this positioning on their gatekeeping and programmatic experiences. Sub-themes included: (a) gatekeeping positions, (b) differences in access and interactions, (c) unclear power, and (d) delicate balance.

Gatekeeping positions. Participants discussed varied programmatic positions requiring gatekeeping responsibilities, including supervisor, teacher, co-researcher, and mentor. For Emma, a first year, “transitioning in and out of [multiple roles] was very challenging.” For most participants, the supervisor role was most closely associated with gatekeeping responsibilities. Beth, a doctoral candidate, expressed, “Gatekeeping [is]... much more associated with

supervision...I've not ever associated being a teacher, teaching assistant with gatekeeping. Like that's not something I've ever really thought much about until we're talking." Haley, a first year, discussed informal positions connected to gatekeeping responsibilities. For example, "serving in the clinic is a less formal role in gatekeeping than being a TA or supervisor, but it is a way to assist students in developing and growing their training and skills." In addition, Kaleesi a second year, shared her role was to "be honest and well I feel like it's my role is to do things in my opinion, very developmentally."

Differences in access and interactions. Within this sub-theme, participants described the different access and interactions they had with master's level students relative to faculty members. Specifically, participants described their ability to interact with master's students within many different contexts, which allowed them to gather authentic information about students' professional and personal behaviors. Participants noted this information may not be accessible to faculty or that it is presented through a filter during formal supervision or classroom interactions. Regina George, a second year, noted, "I look at how students act in class because that might be how they act with clients." Theirry, a doctoral candidate, noted tensions might arise from differences in doctoral student and faculty access to master's students. He used the following metaphor to describe his experience:

Like you know one of those speed chases you see on TV, you know where you have the helicopter on top which would be the faculty, and then you have the police on the ground chasing the car which are the doc students where they just have two different vantage points, and sometimes those vantage points don't agree or work together.

Unclear power. Within this sub-theme, participants described the unclear power resulting from a sandwiching between master's students and faculty within evaluative processes. Participants discussed instances where they were unclear about their own power, as well as instances they felt their power called into question. Haley, a first year, expressed, "It is challenging when I am the only one who has had a certain type of experience with a student that may warrant a gatekeeping issue. It feels the validity of my concern is called into question [by the

supervising faculty member]." Lily felt for her to be successful in this position of power meant the master's students needed "to see [her] as a confident professional and everything that you gained from the program." Beth, a doctoral candidate, stated, "We are gatekeepers, but we don't have the authority of gatekeepers...don't have that power." Participants also discussed limitations to the scope of their authority. Specifically, participants expressed that doctoral students have the responsibility to bring gatekeeping issues to light but may not be privy to how (and if) these concerns are addressed. Fred, a second year, stated:

We're betwixt in between... we have requirements to watch [master's students'] development and bring attention to things that we think... might need to be addressed... on the other hand, all we can do with that information is take it to someone else. And then trust that they will do what is best.

Delicate balance. Participants described a delicate balance involved in being a doctoral student and acting in the gatekeeper role. Daisy, a second year, discussed the experience of addressing gatekeeping concerns with faculty. She stated, "I frequently think to myself, the balance of pushing and not pushing. You know as well as I do, you don't want to be the person who is always the squeaky wheel. People get tired of the squeaky wheel." She added, "You still have to consider your pathway because you are not faculty, these are the people that will be helping you get jobs and you don't want to constantly create trouble." Theirry, a doctoral candidate, also expressed concern about potential consequences of raising gatekeeping concerns to faculty members. He stated, "Regardless of your responsibility or... what you do in the program, you're still a student and you kind of have to present it in a way to faculty that doesn't offend them or make them feel some type of way." Maya, a third year, explained that, "Seeking balance is important as a doc student, what kind of power do you have and what is the chain of command."

Developing a Gatekeeper Identity

The second theme related to developing a gatekeeper identity. As part of this experience, participants spoke to coming to understand gatekeeping in relation to the therapeutic alliance, parallel growth

processes, and program environments serving as the container to this development. Sub-themes included: (a) role of the relationship, (b) developmental experiences, and (c) program context.

Role of the relationship. Relationships were perceived as integral to successful gatekeeping. Participants shared a common idea that gatekeeping issues should be addressed in a respectful and honest manner. Thierry, a doctoral candidate, stated, “[Mutual respect has] been the biggest help... because half of it is getting students to understand, being transparent in the process with them and not having students be so afraid to be themselves because they’re afraid of being gatekept.” Participants also spoke to their professional counselor identity as both a hindrance and an aid to performing gatekeeping functions. Bill Nye, a doctoral candidate, discussed tensions that exist between the counselor and gatekeeper role. He noted, “There’s still that nice guy in me that wants to be able to see the best in everybody... Ultimately I have to remind myself that is a part of my job... and might mean slowing things down or might mean them leaving the program.”

Developmental experiences. During the interviews, participants reflected on areas of development achieved and those still needed to build their gatekeeping practice. Some participants expressed difficulties understanding their place as a gatekeeper, believing in themselves, and finding confidence to address concerns. Heather, a first year, stated, “[My] personal comfort level with addressing gatekeeping concerns is what I’m going to have to grow through and become flexible and adaptable with.” Participants also discussed instances of overcoming their fears and developing more confidence in their gatekeeping approach. Bill Nye, a doctoral candidate, noted, “I think when it comes to working with colleagues I still sometimes also struggle with it, the fact of viewing myself as equal, just as qualified person.” For several participants, adopting a developmental perspective was helpful. Maya, a third year, stated, “Working with master’s students and seeing what they’re going through and what is developmental was a pivotal point in understanding gatekeeping.” Kay, a doctoral candidate, discussed the utility of understanding parallels between her supervisees’ and her own development. Fred concluded, “[Gatekeeping] is not as black and white as some people would like to make it. There are some things that make you

unsuitable for this job, but you need to investigate more... you need to understand the motivation behind it.”

Program context. The final sub-theme pertained to the impact of training program contexts on participants’ gatekeeping identity development. Participants shared many ideas around the support and lack of support received when addressing gatekeeping concerns. Penny, a first year, stated, “Support and the respect and confidence in responsibility given to us, adds...to you taking on more of a role and realizing the weightiness of it and the importance of it...feeling empowered and supported.” While support was identified as an important component to gatekeeping identity development, not all participants felt supported through the process. Maya, a third year, stated, “Sometimes people agree there’s a problem in private, but won’t support it in public.” Emma, a first year, advised, “If you don’t have the support of the higher ups within the department, [gatekeeping] would be very difficult.” Participants held different perceptions on whether the logistical and emotional gatekeeping supports they had received were adequate for their development.

Participants also discussed challenges related to the lack of gatekeeping policy and training in their programs, generally and specific to the roles of doctoral students. Truth Teller, a second year, discussed perceived gaps between gatekeeping policy in theory and in practice. He stated, “There seems to be a pretty significant discrepancy on how much gatekeeping occurs because you know in my experience in my master’s program and doc program, some people make it through that are not as competent or as knowledgeable.” Further, Penny and Daisy referenced a lack of discussion about gatekeeping, with the latter stating, “I don’t feel like we even really have that conversation. We just do a lot of stepping around and playing a lot of politics.” To achieve greater procedural clarity, Haley suggested faculty should create competency plans for doctoral students to clearly address the role of doctoral students within gatekeeping processes.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore doctoral students’ lived experiences as gatekeepers. We

were also interested in exploring how programmatic levels (i.e., first year, second/third year, doctoral candidate) may impact gatekeeping perceptions. Using transcendental phenomenological analysis, we identified two themes and seven sub-themes capturing these 15 participants' experiences.

In alignment with previous findings, participants described a gatekeeping policy-to-practice gap (Brear & Dorian, 2010; Kerl & Eichler, 2007; Schuermann et al., 2018). Specifically, participants described inconsistent follow-through on gatekeeping policy by faculty doctoral peers, fear of repercussions and litigation, and some uncertainty about when gatekeeping intervention is necessary. Brear and Dorian (2010) found that collegial and institutional support influenced faculty members' follow-through. Schuermann et al. (2018) highlighted covert mechanisms that can impact gatekeeping in practice, such as power differentials and competing institutional priorities. Further, these researchers found that faculty members at different academic ranks may hold different perceptions, strengths, and vulnerabilities related to gatekeeping. Our findings suggest the gatekeeping policy-to-practice gap appears to start earlier in counselor educators' careers and inconsistencies within programmatic gatekeeping infrastructures may exacerbate such.

Previous research has yet to address the lived experiences of doctoral students as gatekeepers. The present findings shed light on salient points of departure in the gatekeeping experiences of doctoral students relative to faculty members. These included doctoral students' unique access to master's level students, multiple and often concurrent roles, and a "betwixt" position held between faculty and master's level students in programmatic hierarchies. CACREP (2016) outlines the duty of faculty to implement gatekeeping, and doctoral students frequently collaborate with faculty. However, as discussed by our participants, it should not be assumed that this collaboration is without power differentials. Specifically, participants discussed being expected to serve in gatekeeping roles, but do not always have the power (perceived or actual) to follow-through on gatekeeping concerns observed in supervision, the classroom, or other relevant settings. Additionally, participants discussed challenges stemming from raising a gatekeeping concern to faculty members that were not only evaluating them, but also held

powerful future roles, such as dissertation chair, employment reference, and professional colleague.

Due to the nature of our sample, we were able to explore the lived experiences of doctoral students as a whole, as well as experiences by programmatic levels (i.e., first year, second/third year, candidate). Across the themes, we observed that participants' perceptions and involvements in gatekeeping changed as their statuses in the program changed. Specifically, first year doctoral students were more likely to understand gatekeeping from a theoretical perspective. More advanced doctoral students had greater understanding of gatekeeping in practice, including additional steps to the gatekeeping process. Additionally, advanced doctoral students demonstrated a more internalized and personalized gatekeeping identity. For example, advanced doctoral students were more likely to use first-person language and actual experiences when describing themselves as gatekeepers, while beginning students utilized language that was more third person and hypothetical.

Implications for Counselor Education Programs

Based on our findings, we offer several suggestions to counselor education programs seeking to strengthen their gatekeeping processes and doctoral student development. First, counselor education faculty should strive to create, implement, and educate doctoral students on clear and transparent gatekeeping policies. This may help facilitate doctoral students' future functioning as faculty gatekeepers. We suggest that master's and doctoral program handbooks - outline specific gatekeeping procedures. Open discussions about gatekeeping among master's students, doctoral students, and faculty can serve as another step to clarify gatekeeping expectations and roles. Thus, master's students can make informed decisions about what to share and with whom, and doctoral students can be clear on the roles they play in evaluation and gatekeeping.

Second, we recommend that gatekeeping be more explicitly included as a distinct domain of professional preparation for doctoral students. Several participants in this study noted that gatekeeping was not a topic widely covered in their curriculum, and that their role in gatekeeping processes was often not delineated. Counselor education programs can do a

better job of preparing doctoral students for gatekeeping through specific didactic and experiential lectures in designated courses of the doctoral program. Our findings also underscore the efficacy of applying a scaffolded approach to helping doctoral students develop a gatekeeping professional identity. Resembling other identity development frameworks (Limberg et al., 2013; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2017), supporting gatekeeper identity development may entail a more theoretical foundation, followed by supervised practice and feedback, and finally, developing a more personalized gatekeeping approach. Consideration may also be given to parallel processes transpiring between master's students' counselor development and doctoral students' development as teachers, supervisors, researchers, and evaluators.

Finally, we suggest paying explicit attention to the impact of various power differentials on gatekeeping follow-through. Participants in this study referenced feeling "betwixt" between master's students and faculty within their programs. Efforts should be given to empower doctoral students to enact the gatekeeping role entrusted to them. Toward this, gatekeeping policies may delineate that gatekeeping concerns noted by doctoral students first be addressed directly with master's level students. While this would occur under faculty supervision, this removes potential triangles and prepares doctoral students to enact this role in their future careers. Counselor education programs may also consider ways to involve doctoral students in gatekeeping procedures, such as annual student reviews and new student admissions, where it is developmentally appropriate and not in violation of students' privacy rights. We also recommend that faculty supervisors proactively foster conversations with doctoral students about potential power dynamics and that they co-construct boundaries and strategies for navigating this complex terrain.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There were several limitations to this study that warrant consideration. First, most participants identified as White and female. Greater diversity within the sample may yield different results. This is an important consideration as a few participants noted

intersections in their gatekeeping experiences with some of their other major identity markers (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity); however, we did not explicitly explore these factors. Second, while we collected some information about participants' training programs and experiences, we did not gather information on factors such as program sizes and the number of master's students, which may have impacted participants' lived experiences. Finally, as part of our analysis, we grouped participants into first year, second/third year, and candidate training levels. We did not ascertain if participants' programs reflected a traditional cohort model, nor did we inquire how long participants' in the candidate training level had been doctoral candidates. As such, the described categories were likely not entirely homogenous groups and may not have been sensitive to some within-group differences.

Several directions for future research exist. First, given the relevance of power dynamics to the current findings, future researchers may benefit from the utilization of a more diverse sample and more specific inclusion of significant cultural identity markers in their analyses. Second, our findings indicated that more explicit attention is needed to clearly define doctoral students' gatekeeping roles and training to enact this professional function. Future researchers may survey counselor education programs about current doctoral student gatekeeping practices, including strengths and deficits, and develop a list of best practices. Additionally, counselor education faculty may benefit from scholarship that outlines developmentally informed curriculum for gatekeeper training. Finally, while not addressed in the discussed themes, several participants raised gatekeeping issues they had experienced related to inappropriate, and sometimes romantic/sexual, relationships between students and faculty. Future researchers should examine general gatekeeping scenarios where doctoral students may be involved, as well as focus on specific ethical concerns requiring gatekeeping attention, such as sexual-related boundary violations.

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