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Exploring the Program-Site Alliance: Building Partnerships Between Counseling Programs and Fieldwork Sites

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Abstract

Practicum and internship experiences are critical in students' professional development in counselor education programs, and the dynamics that occur between programs and field sites can impact these experiences. A program-site alliance is a measure of how well these entities work together. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the authors interviewed five site supervisors and found five themes (Site Supervisor Role, Communication Within the Program-Site Alliance, Independent Mutualism, Regulated Support, and Inconsistency Between Program-Site Alliance) capturing the essence of the program-site relationship. The authors explore implications for practice and future research.

Keywords

interpretative phenomenological analysis, site supervisors, program-site alliance, counselor education

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Practicum and internship experiences are critical in students' professional development in counselor education programs, and the dynamics that occur between programs and field sites can impact these experiences. A program-site alliance is a measure of how well these entities work together. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the authors interviewed five site supervisors and found five themes (Site Supervisor Role, Communication Within the Program-Site Alliance, Independent Mutualism, Regulated Support, and Inconsistency Between Program-Site Alliance) capturing the essence of the program-site relationship. The authors explore implications for practice and future research.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, site supervisors, program-site alliance, counselor education

Counselor education (CE) curriculum at the master's level typically includes field experiences in the form of practicum and internship. Substantial development can occur during this practice period (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; CACREP, 2016; Dodds, 1986), and field experiences have proven to significantly influence CITs' level of competence (Bjornestad et al., 2014; Carter & Duchac, 2013; Lewis et al., 2005; Uellendahl & Tenenbaum, 2015). As such, there is a need for CE personnel to develop working relationships with those who serve as site supervisors during CITs' field placement. For the purposes of this study, the authors refer to the relationship between individuals affiliated with CE programs and those affiliated with field sites as the program-site alliance (PSA). By utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we explored site supervisors' experience and the meaning they make when engaged in a PSA. The guiding research question was: What is site supervisors' experience when they are in a relationship with their affiliated CE program during CIT field experiences? Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis draws from various methodological philosophies, focuses on the voices of the participants, and investigates participants' meaning making within a specific phenomenon (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, it was a methodology well suited for exploring the PSA from the site supervisor's perspective as this relationship is key to CIT outcomes.

The Program-Site Alliance

Program-site alliances are complex in that two systems with differing goals unite to train future counselors. Counselor education programs overarching goal is to graduate effective professional counselors, while the main goal for field placement sites is to provide quality counseling services to the population they serve (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Dodds 1986).

Fieldwork is a required component for many CE programs (CACREP, 2016), and professional organizations ethically mandate the inclusion of fieldwork in training programs (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; ASCA, 2018). Coordinating fieldwork experiences for CITs is an expected responsibility for those working in CE programs. However, organizations and agencies are not required to serve as field placement sites to fulfill their organizational responsibilities. If an entity chooses to serve as a field placement site, the individuals within that system decide to take on additional responsibilities.

When engaged in a PSA, a field placement site assigns a site supervisor for the CIT. A site supervisor is responsible for monitoring the quality of services provided to their clientele and enhancing the professional development of CITs while acting as gatekeepers to the counseling profession (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Sopko (2012) found site supervisors believed their role included counselor, teacher, encourager, consultant, model, observer, expert/advisor, collaborator, and fosterer of relationships amongst other staff members. The Council for Accreditation of Counselor and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) requires CITs to attend one hour of supervision per week (Standard 3.H, L). Throughout the academic term, site supervisors typically complete assessments to document CITs' progress and communicate the results to the appropriate individual in the CE program. The site supervisor role is multifaceted, time-intensive, and is in addition to their typical job duties.

Because a PSA is a partnership, there are also expectations of the individuals within the CE program. Sometimes duties are given to one faculty member, or faculty divide the workload according to counseling specialty. Some universities use a liaison who that acts as a field placement coordinator responsible for bridging the gap between sites and institutions. There is flexibility in how CE programs manage their role in the PSA. However, some duties are similar across programs. Sopko (2012) described CE programs' role as one that monitors CIT development and supports the site supervisor. Monitoring CIT development typically occurs as soon as the first term; therefore, CE programs are likely aware of CITs' overall development and usually share this information with site supervisors (ACA, 2016; ASCA, 2018; Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; CACREP, 2014; Sopko, 2012). There is an expectation that if faculty members have concerns about a CIT, then the program's personnel are to communicate those concerns to site supervisors (Sopko, 2012). Site supervisors are responsible for notifying CE program personnel if there is a concern about a CIT, but there is also an expectation that the site supervisor is supported by CE program personnel as they attend to the situation (Sopko, 2012). Lastly, CE programs are responsible for ensuring field placement sites meet the required standards set by their accrediting body (e.g., CACREP).

Research has illustrated that communication is vital to the success of PSA's. According to Carter and Duchac (2013), both site supervisors and counselor educators acknowledged the need for more effective communication with field placement sites. Site supervisors said they had minimal contact with their affiliated CE program, and few considered their relationship with the CE program a partnership (Carter & Duchac, 2013). Uellendahl and Tenenbaum's (2015) findings echoed those of Carter and Duchac (2013) in that site supervisors were eager for more connection with their affiliated university. A lack of connection and communication left a void that resulted in field sites appearing to have a low level of awareness about the CE program's requirements for CITs (Lewis et al., 2005). When a field placement site is unfamiliar with a CIT's program requirements, it is possible the site will focus more of their resources on the agency's service agenda while overlooking the CIT's training needs (Lewis et al., 2005). Also, according to the sites who were aware of the CE program's requirements, many report the CE program's goals are only somewhat consistent with the goals of their agency (Lewis et al., 2005). It is conceivable a site is not providing a field experience in alignment with the expectations of the CE program (Lewis et al., 2005). Consequently, a CIT may not receive the necessary supervision, clinical hours, or experience needed to develop their skills and abilities

fully. Moreover, it is incumbent for the education program to provide current information regarding the realities of working in the profession to the CITs (Lewis et al., 2005). An institution could fail to discuss present-day professional issues with their students if they have a poor relationship with field placement sites, yielding inadequate field experiences, and unsatisfactory learning outcomes for CITs.

In some instances, a lack of communication in the PSA can result in untrained site supervisors struggling with gatekeeping processes. School counseling site supervisors disclosed a need for support and training because there is little to no structure or process to train site supervisors (Uellendahl & Tenenbaum, 2015). In discussions with social workers, Bogo et al. (2007) established that site supervisors are conflicted in their roles as dedicated professionals and as gatekeepers for the profession. On one hand, site supervisors value operating from a nonjudgmental, strengths-based perspective as well as personalizing approaches to specific individuals and environments (Bogo et al., 2007). While on the other, they must judge CITs' performance and determine an individual's skill level (Bogo et al., 2007). This intrapersonal conflict, along with the reported lack of support or training from the affiliated university, results in loneliness and feeling overburdened by gatekeeping responsibilities (Bogo et al., 2007). The process of failing someone is seen as difficult, stressful, and time-consuming, especially if the supervisee contests the evaluation (Dudek et al., 2005). If a CIT challenges an evaluation, the participants reported feeling like the supervisee was questioning their credibility, others did not trust their judgment, and they feared legal action (Dudek et al., 2005). Site supervisors are hungry for clarity regarding supervision and gatekeeping processes (Uellendahl & Tenenbaum, 2015). Without a proper support system or appropriate training, it is unreasonable to expect site supervisors to engage in effective gatekeeping when they feel overwhelmed by the possible complications of the evaluation process.

The relational climate in a PSA is an influential change agent for CIT outcomes (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Carter & Duchac, 2013; Dodds, 1986), much like the relational climate in therapeutic and supervisory alliances have proven to be significant during CITs' growth and development (Bordin, 1979, 1983; Cloitre et al., 2004; Ladany et al., 1999; Ladany et al., 2008; Orlinsky et al., 1994; Safran & Muran, 2000; Watkins, 2013). The relational climate of a PSA enhances a CITs' field experience (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Carter & Duchac, 2013; Dodds, 1986). A strong PSA could make for a rich learning environment for CITs. If a PSA is stressful, it could impede CITs' learning opportunities. Training programs requiring a fieldwork component could benefit from an inquiry thoroughly investigating site supervisors' experience in the PSA, given the need for strong alliances and the factors identified in the current literature. As such, the researchers captured an in-depth account of site supervisors' lived experience using IPA.

Personal Context

The first author has served as a site supervisor and as a field placement coordinator. As a site supervisor, I experienced the intrapersonal conflict identified in the literature. I was excited to have another individual in the building who could help with the workload, and I always found it rewarding to be involved in a CIT's development. However, I was very concerned about the additional responsibility a CIT brought to my already full workload as well as my competency as a supervisor. Then when I moved into a field placement coordinator position for a CE program, I found myself pressured to find field placement sites for CITs and, more notably, consciously asking overworked clinicians to commit to engaging in CITs' development. The insight gained from this inquiry will offer programs that require fieldwork suggestions to manage the PSA, so all parties benefit from the field experience.

The second author was the internship coordinator for a CACREP-accredited counseling program and has continued to maintain relationships with site supervisors. I have had the overarching experience where communication is limited between parties unless issues or concerns arise with a CIT. With a limited relationship, I found it challenging to engage in coordinated remediation efforts. As an internship coordinator, I was conflicted about completing tasks related to engaging site supervisors while attending to other duties associated with tenure-track faculty. I now advocate for fewer field placement sites where we can focus our energies on developing stronger PSAs. Coordination and working with sites where our department has stronger alliances have proven beneficial in CIT training and efficiency when dealing with student concerns.

Methodology

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is integrative in nature as it draws from transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology, and hermeneutical phenomenology to provide a holistic view of a specific experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). These perspectives inform three major tenants of IPA. First, IPA is a framework utilized by researchers to gather rich data and "comprehend lived experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Second, an interpretive process reveals participants' and researchers' knowledge (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith et al., 2009). Lastly, researchers conduct a detailed examination of each participants' emic perspectives referred to as idiography. Idiography is "an in-depth analysis of single cases and examining individual perspectives of study participants, in their unique contexts" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 363). Researchers utilize IPA to engage in reflections produced when participants contemplate a significant event in their life (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) has stated, "when people are engaged with 'an experience' of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections" (p. 3). The expectations of site supervisors in the PSA are a significant undertaking, especially because the duties are ancillary to site supervisors' primary responsibilities as an employee of their agency or organization (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Dodds 1986). And as indicated in the literature, the PSA can be a source of substantial stress and heightened emotions (Bogo et al., 2007; Carter & Duchac, 2013; Dodds, 1986; Dudek et al., 2005; Lewis et al., 2005). The PSA is an important relationship worthy of detailed examination from a site supervisor's perspective.

Participants

By joining an IPA inquiry, participants agreed to engage in a relational, interpretive process. Participants were involved in a high level of reflexivity to provide a detailed account of their experience and meaning-making processes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Because idiography is an essential element in IPA, attention is on the particular or specific rather than the general or universal (Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 1995); therefore, small sample sizes are appropriate for this method of inquiry (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Prior to soliciting participation, the researchers obtained IRB approval for research involving human subjects. They selected participants based on the following criteria: (a) must have served as a site supervisor for couple and family, mental health, or school counseling students, (b) must have served as a site supervisor for three or more years, and (c) the site supervisors' place of employment had to be affiliated with a CACREP accredited university. Purposeful sampling took place via listservs specific to the counseling profession and through direct contact with

CE faculty. The first five respondents met selection criteria (three self-identified as male, two self-identified as female) and included in the study. Participants practiced in various counseling settings (one school counseling; four mental health counseling) and geographic locations representing the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision regions (three from the Rocky Mountain region; one from the North Central region; one from the North Atlantic region). All five participants identified as White, and the researchers protected their anonymity with the use of pseudonyms.

All participants had a minimum of three years' experience as a site supervisor. Caty reported serving as a site supervisor for three years and working with approximately five CITs. Darrin stated he had supervised approximately 15 CITs over the span of five years. John said he supervised about ten CITs over the course of seven years. Amy has worked with over 90 CIT's throughout the seven years she has served as a site supervisor. And Henry has worked as a site supervisor for ten years and in that time has supervised between 60 and 80 CITs. All participants had an extensive history collaborating in PSAs as site supervisors, which indicates a high level of homogeneity as expected of an IPA inquiry (Smith et al., 2009).

Role of the Researchers

In IPA, the researcher is instrumental in the process and takes an active role in understanding participants' experiences and meaning-making processes (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). As researchers, we acknowledged our backgrounds, common racial identification, experiences, interpersonal skills, cross-cultural competency, and empathy impacted the interpretation process in IPA (Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). For instance, one author's professional experiences include serving as a site supervisor, and the other author was the fieldwork coordinator for his institution at the time of this study. Gadamer (1990/1960) has stated a researcher may have some level of awareness regarding their assumptions before the initiation of the study, but additional preconceptions will emerge throughout the study. Therefore, our assumptions about the PSA likely introduced bias throughout the entire research process.

To ensure the researchers prioritized participants' voices, the researchers engaged in a constant and cyclical hermeneutic process to increase awareness of our assumptions (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, we were dedicated to regularly reflecting on and dialoguing about what we brought and what the data brought to the study (Gadamer, 1990/1960; Smith et al., 2009). It was vital our fore-structure did not overshadow participants' detailed, personal accounts of the phenomenon and their meaning-making process. We engaged in various strategies to ensure trustworthiness.

Data Collection

We followed the processes suggested by Smith et al. (2009) for data collection and analysis. The first author conducted two rounds of unstructured, in-depth interviews individually with each participant, except Henry. He only completed the first round of unstructured interviews due to personal reasons. Unstructured interviews tend to be more defined by the participant without being led by the assumptions or biases of the researcher (Smith et al., 2009). We scheduled two rounds of interviews to maximize the range and depth of participants' narratives. Each round of interviews had a primary focus and started with a core question that answered the overall research question. In the first round of interviews, the core question was, "Please discuss your experience with your affiliated university when you are supervising CITs." In the second round, the core question was, "What does the PSA mean to you?" To facilitate the discussion, the first author asked additional individualized questions

in each interview based on participants' accounts, which elicited in-depth narratives, thoughts, and feelings about PSAs. Interviews averaged 45 minutes in length and approximately seven weeks passed between rounds. After each round of interviews, the recordings were transcribed and properly stored to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

We relied on the data analysis process outlined by Smith et al. (2009). We conducted a detailed examination required of idiography by focusing on one transcript at a time, repeatedly reading the transcripts and listening to the interviews. We created notes using exploratory commenting to document anything of interest in each transcript, such as speech patterns, word choice, or metaphors used by participants. We also took note of "things that matter to them (key objects of concern such as relationships, processes, places, events, values and principles) and the meaning of those things for the participant (what those relationships, processes, places, etc. are *like* for the participant)" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). Using our initial notes, we created emergent themes that were our interpretations of the participant's words and thoughts. We then began to develop connections across the emergent themes to better understand their meaning-making processes related to PSAs. We repeated this process for each data set the five participants generated. Our last step was to find patterns across the five accounts. We searched for any relationships between themes as well as any similarities and differences in experiences and meaning-making processes. We followed the same procedures throughout the second round of analysis. The emergent themes from the first round of analysis informed our core question for the second round of interviews. Once we analyzed the transcripts from the second round of interviews, we identified superordinate, or major, themes and any subthemes that captured participants' lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Strategies for Trustworthiness

Because interpretation is a cornerstone of IPA, this inquiry was vulnerable to violations of trustworthiness. As Smith et al. (2009) has acknowledged, interactions with participants' raw data decrease as one moves through the analytic process. Consequently, it is likely researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013) could heavily influence the results. In an effort to prioritize participants' voices, we implemented various measures to manage threats to trustworthiness. The most significant of which were member checks. We conducted individual member checks after each round of data analysis to ensure the accuracy of the emergent themes. There was a final member check when the entire analytic process was complete to verify the overall findings. All participants engaged in all three rounds of member checks except Henry; he only participated in the first member check and the final one due to personal reasons. According to Cho and Trent (2006), member checks can occur throughout the research process, not only at the end of the study. As such, each participant engaged in three member checks throughout this inquiry via video conferencing. Further, we fostered researcher reflexivity (Anderson 2008; Darawsheh, 2014) through memoing as we viewed participants' accounts through our personal lens. Memoing also became one of several sources of triangulation to examine the integrity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Maxwell, 2013). We utilized another form of source triangulation by collecting data from a total of ten interviews, which are "multiple copies of the same source type" (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). We engaged in contextual validation by comparing the data to the current literature (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the inquiry, we engaged in researcher triangulation (Denzin, 1989) by meeting regularly during the data analysis phase to mitigate single-researcher bias. The second author served as an auditor for the first author, the

primary interviewer and data analyst. Lastly, we fostered trustworthiness through persistent observation by thoroughly examining the data to identify characteristics and elements that were most relevant to our research question and focusing on them in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the use of persistent observation, we provided the depth required of an IPA study. These various strategies promoted credibility in the findings.

Results

Five superordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009) emerged to represent site supervisors' experience of the PSA: site supervisor role, communication within the PSA, independent mutualism, regulated support, and inconsistency between PSAs. Two superordinate themes had several subthemes each. See Table 1 for all emergent themes.

Table 1

Final Themes

Theme 1: Site Supervisor Role
- *Subthemes:* Gatekeeper, Facilitator of CIT Development, Sense of Pride, Welcomed Responsibility

Theme 2: Communication Within The PSA
- *Subthemes:* Ally in Fulfilling Site Supervisor Duties, Expression of The University's Dedication, Barriers to Effective Communication

Theme 3: Independent Mutualism

Theme 4: Regulated Support

Theme 5: Inconsistency Between PSAs

Theme 1: Site Supervisor Role

The superordinate theme, Site Supervisor Role, captured what participants experienced as their responsibilities and the meaning they made of the role. It included multiple subthemes: Gatekeeper, Facilitator of CIT Development, Sense of Pride, and Welcomed Responsibility. Gatekeeper emerged as a subtheme to describe the site supervisor's role in guarding against incompetent counselors entering the field and potential ethical violations. For example, Henry said,

> Uh, and, and, and some of that is selfish, because I am a clinical snob, and you're coming into my profession. I don't need somebody who, who can't counsel, and doesn't know what to do with emotions. I think it's grossly unprofessional for a counselor to say, "Hey, let me reflect that emotion." And then when you get to that emotion, you're like, "What the hell do I do?" So, um, I'm huge with gatekeeping, too. So I do, I consider myself to be a little more aggressive or blunt. And some of that is because I need to keep out who is actually doing work and who is not. (Rd 1)

Many participants discussed the emotional turmoil they experienced as gatekeepers. Caty described her experience when she had to tell a potential CIT they were not going to be placed at her site because they were not a good fit for the site. "And just kind of that devastated blow that these people experienced. I mean, it was really hard for me to be the one to be like, 'I'm really sorry, but we picked somebody else.'" (Caty, Rd 1). Amy shared her experience when she had to terminate a CIT's placement. She said, "It's like once I've made the decision, it's very hard for me, because I feel bad. I feel bad for the student, and it's embarrassing, and it's

awkward" (Amy, Rd 1). John had a CIT who was struggling with an active substance addiction. After taking steps to intervene, the situation was not resolving, leaving him unsure how to proceed. He shared using a monster as a metaphor for the CIT's behavior, "And when [the CIT] became more of the monster and more of the monster as she was kind of steeped in denial [of her addiction], um yeah so, we kinda became lost ourselves in like what to do" (John, Rd 1). Gatekeeper duties were emotionally taxing for the site supervisors. However, participants said protecting their clients, the agency or organization they worked at, and the profession was much more critical than the emotional toll they encountered as gatekeepers. For example, Caty stated, "Because it's my job, [CITs are] acting on my license. So, I want to make sure they're doing the right thing and acting ethically and appropriately..." (Rd 2).

Participants also saw the Site Supervisor Role included being a Facilitator of CIT Development. They said fieldwork was a complimentary element to what the CIT was learning in the classroom. CITs must apply the conceptual material they have accumulated in a practical setting, such as the field placement agency. Darrin stated, "...on my end, I want to help that [CIT] be able to take what they're learning in school and put that into practice in a supervised setting where they can learn and not do damage" (Rd 1). Caty reported wanting to supplement academic knowledge with practical insight, "...like if these are things that they don't talk about [in class], then I know, 'Oh, that's really an area I want to focus on because if they're not learning about it in class, then maybe there's some things I can shed light on in, in practical experience...'" (Rd 2). For Henry, practicality was fundamental for CIT development. He said, "So I'm constantly fighting the theoretical stuff that they're learning with, "Is that practical? What's your intention? And do you believe what you're hearing? What are you reading? How are you analyzing what you're reading?" (Henry, Rd 1). Also, it became evident that the Facilitator of CIT Development subtheme and the Gatekeeper subtheme were related. Participants shared that if a CIT was not developing as expected, the site supervisor would activate the Gatekeeper role. For example, Henry said,

> I have been one to tell people that I'm calling all their clients, and that I'm gonna have conversations with their [university] supervisors, um, because I'm concerned regarding, you know, their lack of development, if they hit a plateau... (Rd 1)

Another subtheme was Sense of Pride. The participants expressed how they felt proud of their accomplishments as practitioners and supervisors. Amy expressed the pride she has regarding her field placement site. She said, "But for the most part, I love what we [Amy's agency] do. We serve a couple hundred people a week (pause). And, um, I'm very pleased with the internship program that we have" (Amy, Rd 1). John displayed pride when he spoke of his contact with past CITs,

> I think that's the (pause) that's the fun thing is that I have stayed in contact with almost all of my interns that I've had (pause) when I do my interviewing skills class, if I'm teaching it myself, I'll show them my former interns and what they're doing professionally. I'll be like, "Look at this (pause) this is what's happened." (Rd 2)

Some participants spoke to Sense of Pride specifically, while others discussed it more implicitly.

Lastly, Welcomed Responsibility emerged as a subtheme to Site Supervisor Role. This subtheme highlighted participants' willingness to take on additional responsibilities as a site supervisor. Participants explained no matter the level of pressure associated with supervising

CITs, they continued to volunteer for the role. Caty viewed supervising CITs as a way to give back to her profession. She said, "I just like feeling like I'm giving back but I feel like it's such a big part of our profession to do something, to pay it forward." (Caty, Rd 2). Amy expressed, "I love [site supervision]. This makes me happy. And I love students. I love interviewing them. I love choosing them and hiring them. I love training them. I love doing supervision with them" (Rd 2). Others said they take on this additional responsibility as a way to maintain the integrity of the profession. Darrin said,

> And so if I, you know, I had an intern do something that, you know, did something dangerous or got themselves hurt, or say, got somebody else hurt through, you know, just really poor actions or something, that's gonna reflect more (pause) that's gonna reflect in a lot more areas than only on a student's grade report, the transcript. (Rd 2)

In reference to his gatekeeping situation where a CIT was struggling with an active addiction, John stated,

> Yeah, I feel like um one of the things that I was most concerned about was her A, but B, her clients. She was seeing clients in error, I believe, and so the reputation of our agency was at risk. (Rd 1)

Even after managing that challenge, he explained,

> I mean I think one of the coolest things about my experience in that is that all the clinicians that I have supervised over the years at a site are still in contact with me and I get to hear about their amazing careers, their amazing private practices. And so, that just is a rewarding part of my career. So, I think despite having that one really challenging experience it's, uh overall, it's such a wonderful thing. (Rd 1)

Caty also demonstrated Welcomed Responsibility when she shared,

> I take on that, um, it's a choice to supervise, and so I need to be prepared for that responsibility and, um, be willing to sort of address concerns, and confront, and things like that. Um. Because it really (pause) uh, it's an option. I don't have to do this, so if I'm gonna choose to do something I should be fully invested in it. (Rd 1)

All participants disclosed challenges to being a site supervisor, but they eagerly continued volunteering for the Site Supervisor Role.

Theme 2: Communication Within the PSA

Communication within the PSA emerged as did several subthemes, including Ally in Fulfilling Site Supervisor Duties, Expression of the University's Dedication, and Barriers to Effective Communication. The first subtheme, Ally in Fulfilling Site Supervisor Duties, highlighted communication as a tool that helped site supervisors fulfill their responsibilities, particularly regarding the Gatekeeper role. Henry stated,

Those [gatekeeping] conversations are so much easier, uh, when there's open lines of communication, compared to when it's kind of, you know, behind the scene, and not really hands-on from, uh, the academic institution. I really struggle to have those conversations about when [CITs are] struggling. (Rd 1)

John provided an example of the difficulty he faced as a Gatekeeper when communication with the university was unproductive and missing. He shared,

we really needed an urgent intervention, but our system was set out that it made it very challenging and that's, I think, why we wanted to lean on the supervisor from the university (pause), and that was the worst part is that one of my good colleagues who is now the director there I couldn't even get her to understand how urgent the situation was. (John, Rd 1)

He reported that it seemed like

... [the university] didn't want to take any action. They seemed to not be able to do anything about that so (pause). Then one day, the intern was gone and she went to [city name] where she was put into inpatient and we never heard from her again. (John, Rd 1)

A lack of communication between site supervisors and CE programs exacerbated concerning issues.

Participants also discussed how communication helped with the second subtheme, Facilitator of CIT development. Darrin said communication with the university allowed him to know "what the school expects" so he knew what CITs "need to be experiencing at our site" (Darrin, Rd 2). When there was clear communication with the university, Darrin could attend to specific programmatic requirements for individual CITs. Amy echoed this idea,

...if I'm connected to the [university] person, um, I feel like I can, you know, toss around ideas for the student. I feel more connected to the student and the program. Otherwise, it's, I have students who have schools out there somewhere, and I don't really know what they're doing or what their programs are like (pause). So I feel like I could do my job better if had a better connection. (Rd 2)

Darrin illustrated,

...having that person to be flexible and (pause) creative of going, "Okay, how can we help the student be successful?" Because I would much rather a student be successful and overcome barriers, than, you know, to have to move to another site, or, you know, be removed from the program or something like that... (Rd 2)

Having open communication with the university helped site supervisors fulfill their duties, especially in instances of remediation.

Another subtheme was an Expression of the University's Dedication, which focused on how communication demonstrated CE personnel's commitment to CIT success and willingness to support the field site personnel. John highlighted, "I've really appreciated those who have taken extra time and, and have done a tour of wherever I'm at or something like that, and really

been interested in what the student is doing and their growth" (Rd 2). Henry supported John's position, "Whether it's the site visit before the interns get here, more than halfway through (pause) just so they [know] what, uh, what the organization looks like, and they have hands-on (pause) [a site visit] shows commitment to the organizations and what they're doing" (Rd 1 "Yeah, I mean, I think it's taking the time to communicate" that illustrates a university's care for CITs (John, Rd 2). Participants perceived a greater sense of interest and support from CE personnel when they experienced effective communication.

However, Barriers to Effective Communication emerged as the last subtheme due to the challenges communication brought to PSAs. Caty said, "I definitely feel like that communication can be an obstacle" and "It kinda feels like there's things getting in the way sometimes. And maybe the time is always the factor. And nobody has time" (Rd 2). John shared difficulties he perceived as barriers to communication,

> ...[if] you can't find the site supervisor, you can't schedule a meeting, they don't show up when they schedule it, it's, um, or it's a rushed meeting (pause). They come into your office and they're throwing their stuff down and they say (pause), "All right John, what do you think? Are there any problems? No? Okay, I'm outta here." Like, that doesn't seem like a, a rich experience of learning and, and growth... (Rd 2)

Amy highlighted how one could feel supported or unsupported as a site supervisor, depending on how communication occurs with universities. Amy shared a situation where the university discovered she did not have a supervisor on-site when CITs were present. As a result, CITs were temporarily removed from the site immediately without notice, leaving Amy with many clients who could not receive services. She reported not being aware of this requirement, and the university's personnel asked her to engage in "remediation" (Amy, Rd 1). Amy stated, "The way it happened was, was unkind to the students. It was cruel to our clients. And it was really unfair to me. They could've said, 'Hey, we heard that there's not a supervisor at all times.'" (Amy, Rd 1). She expressed the way the university communicated "...was really punitive (pause). And, um, degrading and condescending..." (Amy, Rd 1). She said she felt personally attacked, unsupported, and judged. She explained,

> ...the difference is when, when I feel supported by the [university] field director...and I've had those experiences. I've had this, this problem with a student. [The university field director said,] "I'm so sorry you're experiencing that. Can you please write that up in a report? And then, um, we'll talk to the student." And, um, I felt supported. And they said, "We're so sorry that happened. We hope that you'll continue to have our students (pause) because we love having them come to your place." (Amy, Rd 2)

Amy's narrative illustrates how communication occurs in the PSA can impact the site supervisor's view of the relationship. For Amy, when "...the response from the school was so kind (pause) I'm like 'Yep, I'll take students from your program any day'" (Amy, Rd 2).

While participants acknowledged various barriers, some provided insight into moving beyond the obstacle. Caty stated,

> Just remembering that they [the university] have their part, I'm doing my part so, um, those obstacles really shouldn't be insurmountable in any way (pause). And I don't feel like they are, I just feel like sometimes (pause) sometimes those obstacles annoy me more than others. So, but, they're not that bad. (Caty, Rd 2)

She admitted to feeling irritated by the barriers, but she demonstrated a willingness to move past them. Other participants spoke of accountability as a way to overcome communication challenges. For John, accountability meant both the university and the site supervisor meet expectations in accordance with their role. He explained,

> The accountability piece is on both sides, and that means that me as the supervisor at the site and, um, the university, who is providing the interns, are held accountable and that means that they're available to answer questions, um, they're available to have tough conversations around remediation, uh, they're there to provide resources for the students, um, both ways (pause) [internship] has to do with, you know, emotional growth and, um, training and, you know, looking at these different models of supervision, uh, you know, whether it's staffing cases or the student's development. There's all these different types of dynamics going on and I think both sides need to be, uh, accountable and available to the students to optimize growth for them. (John, Rd 2)

For Darrin, accountability meant taking responsibility for missteps. When he dealt with the university misplacing an evaluation about a CIT who was presenting with gatekeeping concerns, he reported it was helpful when the university took accountability for their mistake. He said,

> And the school recognized, you know, they quickly owned that they had made mistakes. So, and then, we [the site] probably could have communicated more earlier on our end, too (pause) I'm going, "You know, let's just do the best we can, and let's try and make things work from here. Let's just own what we did wrong and let's learn from it, let's move forward." (Darrin, Rd 2)

Participants viewed the PSA favorably when communication was effective, but their experience of the PSA was negative when communication barriers were present.

Theme 3: Independent Mutualism

Independent mutualism captured the distinction between the field site and the CE program while acknowledging each entity's mutual benefits gained from the PSA. Participants recognized the field site and the university have different goals and approaches to CIT development.

> So, um, academically, we-we really have no idea what's going on at the school (pause). Um, and so (pause) and then honestly, the school, I doubt knows (pause) everything I do with that (pause) with that student is learning, uh, learning and is experiencing completely on a day-to-day basis. There's gonna be some stuff that neither one of us fully know what's going on in the other (pause). But, uh, so we have some different worlds that we live in. So, in that essence, we are separate(pause). Um, but we have a common interest in that student. (Darrin, Rd 1)

Henry highlighted the separateness between field sites and universities when he said, "our job is to deal with the lives of other people. A lot of the stuff that's being taught inside of academia is theoretical and conceptual" (Henry, Rd 1). This divergence was present, yet participants spoke of the connection between th3e field site and the university.

I just think it's kind of a give-and-take. Like [the affiliated university gives] me this great person that's gonna work with me and I'm gonna take that responsibility and, and do everything I can to make sure [the CIT is] ready to go out on their own when they're done. (Caty, Rd 1)

Darrin expounded on Caty's description of mutualism,

Because, uh, the student wouldn't being here if it wasn't for the school (pause) and we wouldn't benefit from them being here (pause). And then, the student wouldn't be prepared to enter the field without a site to adequately prepare them as well. So yeah, I do see that as being partners and equal (pause) equal folks on our end as well as the school. (Darrin, Rd 1)

Participants discussed how their site benefits from having CITs placed with them. For example, Darrin shared,

But on this end also, we want it to be mutually beneficial to our facility, that I can take some of the burden off some of my clinicians' workload (pause) by having that intern work with some of our juveniles that don't need quite a high level of intensity but will allow that clinician to be able to focus on the more high-intensity juveniles. (Darrin, Rd 1)

Caty (Rd 2) expanded by saying, "um, not to be blunt but it's free labor. So, it's really nice to have help." John brought up a mutualistic relationship in his discussion of workshops the university offers, "I think things that I've seen really positive is when the, um, [the affiliated] university has done great trainings and, and things like that so it's a really reciprocal relationship" (John, Rd 1). Participants noted the field site, and the university are separate individual entities that engage in a mutually beneficial relationship when they share a CIT. As Darrin (Rd 1) said, "the school is more instructional, and (pause) we're more experiential."

Theme 4: Regulated Support

Regulated Support represented the balance between autonomy for the site supervisor and support from CE personnel. Participants reported appreciating the independence to manage their site and operate as a site supervisor in a manner befitting their environment. They reported they value the ability to call upon the university when needed. For instance, Darrin highlighted calling upon the university when he deemed it necessary,

But, you know, we don't need a ton of interaction, either. Um, I think being able to give the support when we need it and, uh, you know, knowing that the schools seeing the evaluations on the student, knowing where the student's at (pause) the school being able to talk to me if there's any issues in that evaluation process. Making sure the students are getting what they're supposed to get from their site (pause) um, that's fine. (Rd 1)

Participants went on to discuss occurrences when the relationship between autonomy and support was unbalanced. John explained his experience when the university was not present during a significant gatekeeping issue. He stated, "...but I feel like the university (pause) again I love my former school but at the time they had just lost their chair and we were kind of in this place of not having a lot of support" (John, Rd 1). He continued, "...I think in a lot of ways, uh,

I felt maybe even frustration with the [affiliated university]" (John, Rd 1). Additionally, Amy shared her experience of a university providing too much support. She said, "And the school that I have the most trouble with ironically, and thinking about it, is the one that comes most often [for site visits]..." (Amy, Rd 2). Amy went on to say,

> I have mixed feelings because I'd really like to see the schools be more involved in the field. And then I think, "Oh, dear Lord, I don't need them in my business…and I don't have the time."...So there's, there's a grey area. (Rd 2)

Participants valued a balance between autonomy as a site supervisor and the support provided by universities.

> ...there's a space in between because you've got to have some autonomy, you know, of the site and the purpose of the site supervisor, and then the purpose of the school. And each have very distinct purposes and so that kind of create boundaries uh, for each of us (pause) understanding, you know, uh, we can't put too much on the site supervisor. We have to understand they have a job to do and a purpose to do, and I, you know, I in turn, you know, don't harass the school with stuff that, you know, really isn't huge. (Darrin, Rd 2)

Theme 5: Inconsistency between PSAs

The last superordinate theme was inconsistency between PSAs, which discussed the differences site supervisors experience when they had multiple university affiliations or a shift in faculty. Henry explained,

> And it's, it really, the relationship between the school, um, and between, like, their representative from the academic institution and myself, varies significantly on the academic institution on the whole (pause). Um, but, so I have gone anywhere from absolutely no communication, to pretty regular communication in the on-site visits, and working together and really collaborating, um, and really depending on, uh, having a wonderful collaboration and just development of, you know, the counselor-in-training. (Henry, Rd 1)

Amy noticed that the amount of support she receives shifts when she works with multiple universities,

> Some universities offer more support than others. Some schools are like I never hear from anyone. I get the student in. I get an email, "Please do this." and I never hear from them otherwise (pause). So it, it depends on the school. (Rd 1)

For Caty, the inconsistency she experienced left her questioning the program curriculum. She said, "...working with two different universities sometimes it feels like, 'I wonder why this school doesn't do what this school does?' And they're asking different things or checking in at different times. So that's a little bit different" (Caty, Rd 2). Amy discussed experiencing inconsistency in the administration of field site requirements. When referencing the situation where university personnel removed CITs from her site due to a lack of supervision, she shared, "And then knowing that other sites don't have the same enforcement of that rule (pause). That feels personal" (Amy, Rd 1). She felt attacked because she knew other sites with similar

supervision did not have their CITs removed. The meaning participants attached to the inconsistency between PSAs seemed to harm their view of the relationship.

Discussion

The results of this inquiry highlight dynamics found in the PSA parallel dynamics evidenced in other working alliances formed in helping professions. Much like the therapeutic and supervisory alliances (Bordin 1979, 1983), the partners in a PSA mutually agree to specific goals. The mutual goal in therapeutic and supervisory alliances is to utilize the alliances' collaborative nature to foster change for clients or supervisees (Bordin 1979, 1983). Participants described a similar element when they spoke of promoting growth in CITs captured by the subthemes Gatekeeper and Facilitator of CIT Development. In partnership with CE programs, participants hoped to bridge the gap between scholarship and practice to advance ethical counselors prepared for the role. Unlike therapeutic and supervisory alliances, the relationship in PSA's lack hierarchy. Relationships grounded in therapeutic and supervisory alliances assume a degree of expertness as only one partner fosters or supports change, and these relationships are typically more akin to a mentor/mentee relationship (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Bordin, 1979). However, participants reported a strong PSA develops when CE personnel and field site personnel have equal amounts of power, and both accept the other as experts of their respective crafts. As illustrated by the superordinate themes Independent Mutualism and Regulated Support, participants acknowledged the university and the field site are independent entities and felt more respected by the CE program when they received a balanced amount of autonomy. In instances where CE personnel become overly involved in the site supervisor's approach to supervision or the field site's daily functioning, site supervisors reported a tenuous PSA. Like the alliances Bordin (1979, 1983) focused on, the collaboration that occurs in the PSA intends to foster change. But unlike those alliances, partners in the PSA have equal amounts of power with different goals for CITs.

Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of site supervisor expectations in the superordinate theme Site Supervisor Role. Bordin (1979, 1983) postulated that partners mutually agree on tasks each will be responsible for in therapeutic and supervisory alliances. When one partner did not follow through with their agreed-upon responsibilities, conflict within the PSA occurred. One participant spoke about misunderstanding a requirement of site supervisors. She understood the concern but the interactions with the university that followed negatively impacted her. How the communication happened left the participant feeling belittled, judged, and unsupported. Another participant shared a situation where the university failed to offer support during a significant gatekeeping issue. Participants reported increased stress levels when they experienced a lack of support during major gatekeeping events and when CE personnel crossed the boundary between their duties and the site supervisor's duties. The PSA became a source of frustration and heightened emotions for these participants as supported by current literature (Bogo et al., 2007; Carter & Duchac, 2013; Dodds, 1986; Dudek et al., 2005; Lewis et al., 2005). Performing the agreed-upon duties within the PSA is critical to a successful relationship.

There are commonalities between the PSA and other working alliances that provide a familiar context for counselor educators and perhaps training programs that require a fieldwork component from other helping professions. The same skills CE personnel and personnel in other helping professions use to build relationships in known working alliances can foster working PSAs. However, some nuances make PSAs unlike other working alliances, such as the lack of hierarchy between site supervisors and CE personnel. Individuals may need to rely on new strategies or skills to prevent conflictual relationships with site supervisors.

Implications for Counselor Educators

The results illustrate the importance of taking the time to foster the PSA. While participants recognized time as a limited resource for both CE personnel and site supervisors, the PSA connection was more substantial when both parties dedicated time to fulfill their duties or communicate with one another. Communication was pivotal in helping site supervisors feel supported in their role, as indicated by the subtheme, Ally in Fulfilling Site Supervisor Duties. As such, it may be helpful if CE programs have the personnel to take on the role of field placement coordinator as their only duty or provide course waivers for faculty members asked to fill this position. One could reduce their workload so individuals could dedicate the time required to foster working PSAs. A field placement coordinator may be very advantageous when site supervisors are navigating gatekeeping issues, too. Dudek et al. (2005) found that the gatekeeper's role is difficult, stressful, and time-consuming. As we found in this study, when CE personnel failed to support site supervisors during gatekeeping concerns or if CE personnel were completely absent, the PSA significantly suffered. Further, prioritizing field placement coordination could remedy the inconsistencies discussed in this study. Some participants reported feeling supported by CE personnel, while others reported a complete lack of support captured by the superordinate theme, Inconsistency Between PSAs. However, they explained communication was a factor that alleviated the stress of managing the inconsistency between relationships. CE personnel must have the time to manage PSA's so they can attend to gatekeeping issues and support site supervisors in need.

In cases where CE programs lack finances to have a specific person take on field site coordinator duties, there are less time-consuming ways CE programs can attend to the PSA. For instance, CE personnel could send a brief email to site supervisors mid-term as a reminder that they are available if needed, as suggested by Amy. Other ideas include creating a plan of action to conduct site visits or training workshops hosted by the affiliated CE program. CE personnel could also hold virtual office hours specifically for site supervisors at some point in the term using a video conferencing platform. Participants voiced they felt supported when they received communication beyond that of the required agreements and evaluations.

While it is imperative CE personnel take time to evaluate their PSAs, perhaps they can standardize field placement procedures at a systemic level. Accrediting bodies (e.g., CACREP, 2016) have set standards regarding fieldwork for CE programs; perhaps regulations regarding the PSA would decrease the inconsistency participants discussed. For example, stipulating the number of PSAs a site can have or regulating how many CIT's a site supervisor can supervise. It could also be helpful to have standards related to the frequency of communication within the relationship. While Lewis et al. (2005) called for an increase in communication, this inquiry highlighted participants' desired balance in communication. Unbalanced communication was directly related to participants feeling unsupported within the PSA. Literature suggests that a strained PSA can interfere with CIT outcomes (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Dodds, 1986; Dudek et al., 2005). Accrediting bodies' involvement in regulating the PSA could enhance a field experience, thereby helping CITs meet student outcome expectations.

Limitations

There were some limitations associated with this study. One was regarding participants' involvement in the data collection phase of the inquiry. After several attempts to connect with Henry for a second interview, he could not complete the second interview due to personal reasons. Henry participated in the first round of interviews and member checks, plus he completed the final member check.

The participant pool could have been a limitation, too. The individuals who volunteered to be participants may have had biases toward the PSA that could have impacted the findings. For example, all participants in this study welcomed the responsibility of supervising CITs and were dedicated to being effective supervisors. Having participants who did not welcome the responsibility in the study could have provided a complete understanding of the phenomenon. Also, the five participants identified as White and did not share additional social locations other than gender. The homogeneity of perspectives and cultural backgrounds in the participant pool may have prevented the full spectrum of experiences from being explored, thus limiting the depth of the findings. The lack of diversity may have implications for trustworthiness, too.

Future Research

This study may initiate various future inquiries. One potential study is to continue exploring the experience of other stakeholders who participate in the PSA. For example, exploring CE personnel or CITs' experiences of the PSA could be phenomenological studies. Having a full picture of the PSA from a phenomenological viewpoint could help create and maintain these relationships. Another qualitative study could be a more in-depth examination of specific emergent themes. For instance, a grounded theory exploring the impact of communication on the development process of PSAs could be a future study. Another potential future qualitative inquiry could be a grounded theory investigation into site supervisors' developmental process as they gain experience in their role. It could be interesting to explore the influential factors that foster or hinder their development. To illustrate, Caty repeatedly referred to the influence her experience as a CIT had on her interactions with supervisees in her role as a site supervisor. Others referenced interactions with specific site supervisors as significant to how they operate as site supervisors.

From a quantitative perspective, researchers may be interested in developing an evaluative tool that assesses site supervisors' perception of the PSA. Researchers could create an instrument for a larger, randomly selected pool of participants based on this study's themes. Additionally, researchers could conduct a factor analysis to confirm themes. A panel of experts could review the instrument to assess reliability and face validity. This instrument could provide counselor educators with a way to investigate techniques and interventions to improve their existing PSAs.

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