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A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Gatekeeping Among Counselor Educators

Carol A. Erbes, Garrett McAuliffe, and Gina Polychronopoulos

Erbes, Carol A., is an assistant adjunct professor in the Counseling Department at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. She has been a clinical therapist for over 25 years and a clinical supervisor for more than 10 years. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, a Certified Substance Abuse Counselor and completed her PhD in Counseling in 2013.

McAuliffe, Garrett, is University Professor of Counselor Education at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. He received his doctorate at the University of Massachusetts. His work includes five books and over 85 other publications on culture and counseling; cultural de-centering; career decision-making; positive counseling; constructivism, and pedagogy in counselor education. He has received the national Publication Award from the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision.

Polychronopoulos, Gina B., is a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at Old Dominion University. She is a full-time research associate for The Center for Educational Partnerships in the College of Education at Old Dominion University. Her research interests include diagnosis, addictive disorders, eating disorders, evidence-based practice, and clinical research.

Abstract

This study examined the gatekeeping experiences of a group of counselor educators, utilizing a phenomenological approach. The stories of the participants in this study provided some important data about what counselor educators perceive as their responsibility for ensuring that only qualified counselors exit from their programs.

Introduction

The practice of gatekeeping is critical for the training of competent professionals in many disciplines, including counseling, social work, and psychology. This is due to the fact that much harm can be done to clients if a student enters the field either unprepared or ill-suited for the work. According to Koerin and Miller (1995), gatekeeping is the effort to prevent "the graduation of students who were not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice" (p. 247).

There is a lack of qualitative research being done on the issue of gatekeeping. The majority of the studies found were quantitative. Those studies were not able to richly portray three important phenomena: what it is like to be a gatekeeper, how the experiences and stresses involved affect the gatekeepers, and how they process these experiences. It is most likely that the gatekeeping experiences, both positive and negative, affect each individual counselor educator somewhat differently. This study attempted to discover, through a phenomenological approach, what those impacts were. This knowledge can then be shared with other counselor educators in hopes of helping them process their own experiences and improve their gatekeeping efforts.

The procedure of gatekeeping, as noted by Campbell (2009), originated in antiquity, in the early practice of medicine. Though the concept of gatekeeping and its practice is not a recent development, the majority of research has been quantitative in nature. One of the broader issues involving the practice of gatekeeping is the need to define impairment. Psychology has used the term impairment to describe trainees whose behavior does not meet the minimum standards of professional competence (Elman & Forest, 2007). There are also problems noted with how impairment and competence are defined. Emerson and Markos (1996) acknowledged that we think we know competence when we see it, but also that severe cases of incompetence are relatively rare. There is general agreement concerning the need to identify areas of impairment (Emerson & Markos, 1996; Halinski, 2009; Sheffield, 1998). Furthermore, researchers have shown that counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998).

Research identifying gatekeeping issues in the fields of psychology, social work, and counseling indicates the need for policies and procedures that would quantify and clarify gatekeeping practices. Homrich (2009) discussed how academic and clinical ability can best be established through quantitative standards and assessment instruments. Cole and Lewis (1993) also discussed the legal complications of the gatekeeping process and examined court cases and their legal and ethical ramifications for social work students' academic and disciplinary dismissals.

Capps (2008), in her dissertation, developed a grounded theory that sought to provide understanding about faculty's experiences working with impaired counseling students. The literature also indicates that counselor educators may be hesitant to screen students for non-academic reasons (Bradey & Post, 1991). In the field of social work, Tam (2004) examined social work field instructors' attitudes about and experiences with gatekeeping and sought to identify evaluation criteria for suitable students.

Only a few qualitative studies were found. Grady (2009), in an ethnographic format, presented the stories of one social work faculty member and one student who failed his/her class, which resulted in automatic expulsion. This approach resulted in a glimpse into the issues and stresses involved in the gatekeeping process from both sides. Kerl and Eichler (2005) identified specific factors that inhibit gatekeeping, such as fear of retribution, loss, or damage and fear of legal action; one of the most common reactions was a feeling of being attacked. In their study, they documented some of the emotional and personal costs of being a gatekeeper through the utilization of several case studies of professionals in the counseling field.

Method

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study as a means of examining the experiences of counselor educators. The specific qualitative methodology selected for this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to discover the very nature of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The main technique utilized in phenomenology involves in-depth interviews with individuals who experience a certain phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The research questions were structured to elicit personal experiences and their impact. These broad research questions were explored utilizing an interview guide format. The study was approved by the Old Dominion University IRB board.

Participants

Participants (N=9) in this study were full-time counseling faculty members. All departments were CACREP accredited. The names and e-mail addresses of a pool of 33 eligible participants were obtained from the counseling program Web sites of five large universities on the East Coast. An initial e-mail detailing the specifics of the proposed study was sent to all eligible participants, along with a request for their participation. A total of 11 counselor educators agreed to participate in the study; ultimately, nine actually followed through with their participation. Only seven of the nine participants responded to attempts to schedule the follow-up interview, as two of the participants did not return phone calls or e-mails. Therefore, they were not represented in the second round of interviews.

The participants included four males and five females. The ages of the participants ranged from 73 to 49; the average age was 60.5. Two of the participants were Black and six were White. There was no effort made to obtain a balance of demographic characteristics. All of the participants had earned doctorates, though the time span of their completion ranged quite widely, from 1980 to 2009. The length of time for holding a doctorate ranged from 33 years to 4 years; the average was 17.75 years. The type of doctorate obtained was not collected due to some participants' concerns about being identified, but most of the doctorates were in counseling-related fields.

There was also a range in the experience level of the seven participants who provided that information. The average length of time as a counselor educator was 17.8 years (ranged from 33 years to 7 years). Experience as a counselor ranged from 30 years to 11 years, with the average being 18.1 years. The final type of experience was as a supervisor. The average length of time as a supervisor was 12.85 years, with a range of 20 years to 5 years.

Overview of Methodology

Qualitative interviewing was selected for this project and a general interview guide approach was utilized as it provided a list of concepts intended to help explore the participant's experiences as gatekeepers in a graduate counseling program. Each participant was interviewed loosely following the guide, but they were encouraged to add other information that they felt was important. This interviewer asked new questions that arose during the course of the interview to help clarify or elaborate on what was said.

Criterion sampling was employed, as it was essential that the subjects be counselor educators who had been actively involved in the gatekeeping process. They

were all selected from CACREP-accredited schools in order to provide standardization of qualifications. Convenience sampling was also utilized. Requests for interviews were e-mailed to the potential pool of 33 subjects, and the hope was that 10–12 would respond with agreements to participate. Those who did agree to participate comprised the sample. In the end, only 11 responded and of those, nine followed through with at least the initial interview.

Information from the subjects was obtained utilizing an in-depth interview process. Each subject was interviewed twice. The interviews were then recorded and subsequently transcribed. The second round of interviews was used to clarify patterns that emerged in the first interview. A peer debriefer and a monitor were used in the analysis process in order to increase inter-rater reliability and to supervise the data analysis process. Several in-person consensus meetings were held to reach agreement on the primary codes, sub-codes, and operational definitions of each code.

Through the process of open and axial coding, two super-ordinate themes were identified, with numerous subthemes. A final codebook was developed and a cross-case display for each theme, by participant, was designed and allowed for a visual representation of the data.

Findings

Two themes emerged from an analysis of the initial and follow-up interviews, namely Gatekeeping Procedures and Challenges of Gatekeeping.

Gatekeeping Procedures

The first theme, Gatekeeping Procedures, incorporated six subthemes, namely how participants defined gatekeeping, the importance of gatekeeping, types of gates and their effectiveness, differences in gatekeepers, the importance of consultation and support, and future improvements in gatekeeping. The importance of gatekeeping and consultation/support along with efforts at improvement will be discussed in more detail.

All participants agreed that gatekeeping was important, essential, and critical. A few participants did acknowledge that they had colleagues who were somewhat reluctant to gatekeep or did not do so at all. The literature, for the most part, supports the importance of gatekeeping in the counseling profession. Findings from many studies indicate that faculty members have frequent dealings with students whose professional performance fails to meet defined standards (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Kerl & Eichler, 2005).

Importance of consultation and support. Every participant mentioned the importance of consulting with others in order to function effectively as a gatekeeper and not make decisions in isolation. All participants indicated that their programs had mechanisms in place to facilitate consultation, such as staff meetings or periodic reviews of student progress. In that vein, the importance of support from others through the consultation process emerged as an important element in the effective gatekeeping process. Most of the participants indicated that they generally felt supported in their gatekeeping duties by colleagues, departments, and universities. Gizara & Forrest (2004) and Younes (1998) discussed the process of making gatekeeping decisions by involving

others through consulting . Some consults can be positive and productive, but some may be controversial and awkward

Improvements. Some of the participants discussed efforts their departments were making that were directed at improving gatekeeping policies, efforts, and procedures. These include refining a professional evaluation form in an effort to better quantify the characteristics they felt counseling students should have. Two of the participants, though, admitted the policies and procedures would be more effective if they were followed as they should be and would like to see that change in the future. The literature suggests that there were several areas of gatekeeping where there were ongoing efforts to make improvements. One of these was in the identification of impairment and includes efforts to quantify important skills so that a measure of some kind could determine effectiveness. Such assessment is a challenge, as Lichtenberg et al. (2007) acknowledged that there is some difficulty in defining competencies in precise and measurable terms, as well as in establishing tools for their assessment. This inability to quantify skills was mentioned by several participants, who expressed frustration that they were unable to measure skills in a valid way.

Challenges of Gatekeeping

The second theme was Challenges of Gatekeeping. This theme incorporated and included 10 subthemes, namely impairment, which incorporated the types of impairment and how they were identified; interventions, which contained informal, formal, and workplace interventions; the developmental process, which included the support/challenge dichotomy; the issue of grades versus skills; legal concerns; individual types of gatekeepers; perceptions from the institution, which included pressures to gatekeep and "rocking the boat"; conflicts experienced; and concerns about being identified in the study. The issues of types of impairment and their identification, the developmental process of counseling students in a program, and the grades versus skills dilemma will be discussed in more detail.

Much of the literature does show that there are indeed challenges to being a gatekeeper. Although qualitative studies on the experiences of gatekeepers were limited, three studies addressed these challenges. Kerl and Eichler (2005) specifically identified factors in faculty that inhibit gatekeeping, such as fear of retribution or damage to reputation. Faculty in their study voiced feelings of denial, lower feelings of entitlement, self-blame, and reduced feelings of control. Similarly, a qualitative study on the effects of the termination process on supervisors and students found that students and supervisors alike experienced trauma because of the termination process and were equally in need of institutional support during and after this process (Smaby, Maddux, Richmond, Lepkowski, & Packman, 2005). Although none of our participants indicated this level of challenge in their gatekeeping experiences, it was likely that more in-depth interviewing might have uncovered deeper reactions to some of the challenges they discussed. Finally, Grady (2009) presented the story of one social work faculty member and one student. This study provided a glimpse into the issues and stresses involved in the gatekeeping process from both the faculty and student perspectives.

Types of impairments and their identification. The issue of impairment, of not being able to function successfully as either a counseling student or a future counseling professional, is central to the practice of gatekeeping. All of the study participants

identified specific student impairment issues that affected counseling students' performance in school or as potential counselors in the field. They all shared numerous cases of students that they had identified over the years as having potential impairment issues that might affect their functioning in the field. These problematic behaviors included lack of skills, personal issues, and behavioral issues.

Four participants, in particular, identified students who had problems with interpersonal skills, boundary issues, ethical problems, and attempts at avoiding clients. Three participants discussed students who had significant enough problems in their personal lives that it impacted their functioning as students and potentially as future counselors.

Identifying impairment. The identification of impairment issues involved the process by which the participants considered problematic current or future behaviors. Four participants discussed the unquantifiable/non-scientific ways that they identify impairment in their students, including the metaphors of "spider senses" and "red flags." However, more specific identification was problematic. Most of the participants, at one time or another during the interviews, spoke of the inability to quantify impairment issues in order to better identify them. One of the participants noted that sometimes an identified impairment issue might be a developmental issue or an issue of different human expression and personality and that gatekeepers need to keep that in mind. There is general agreement in the research concerning the need to identify areas of impairment (Emerson & Markos, 1996; Halinski, 2009; Sheffield, 1998), but counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998). This highlights the critical nature of gatekeeping as a mechanism for identification of those persons in the field, or preparing for the field, who are not suitable to enter practice.

Developmental process. Four of the participants acknowledged the reality of the developmental process, as students commonly mature as they go through the program. During the process, they may make mistakes due to lack of experience and immaturity, but in time, they usually mature. There were some indications in the literature of the existence of a developmental process with some counseling students. To underscore the importance of development, Moore and Urwin (1991) noted that one of the most identifiable student problems was lack of maturity.

Participants noted that it is important to support students during this developmental process, providing guidance and support. However, supporting the student requires a parallel commitment to also challenging their thoughts and behaviors. Ziomek-Daigle (2005) addressed the belief that support and encouragement were important elements of the counselor educator-student relationship, whereas challenge and criticism may be more difficult to do. Participants noted that being supportive as well as challenging counseling students was basically part of the educational task. However, several participants acknowledged difficulty in challenging students since the counseling ethos favors support and encouragement. Therefore, often their training as counselor educators does not involve learning about the disciplinary aspect of their work as gatekeepers.

Grades versus skills. Another gatekeeping challenge that participants noted was the ability of some students to have adequate grades in their coursework, but not the skills necessary to become an effective counselor. Participants stressed the fact that, while

grades were easily quantified, counseling skills may not be, thus making some skills difficult if not impossible to measure. Three participants told stories of students who did well academically but whose skills were lacking; they also expressed frustration at not being able to have a way to quantify those skills in order to remove those students from the program. There seems to be a general consensus that this is a significant concern because students can graduate from the program and enter the workplace with less-than-adequate skills. There is some discussion in the literature about the issue of grades versus skills. Moore and Urwin (1990) acknowledged that students who are either strong or weak in both academic and non-academic criteria present few challenges to the gatekeeping function. However, academically borderline students who have strong practice abilities and professional values, or academically outstanding students with unsatisfactory field performance, present a "gatekeeping dilemma" (Moore & Urwin, p. 123). Often, skill levels cannot be quantified in the same ways that grades can. There remains some difficulty in defining competencies in precise and measurable terms, as well as establishing tools for their assessment (Lichtenberg et al., 2007).

Limitations

There were several notable limitations to this study. First was the small sample size (n=9), though there were numerous efforts to increase the sample size. Of the 33 counselor educators contacted, only nine did the first interview; a sample of 10–12 had been hoped for. Another limitation was the fact that of the nine original participants in the first round of interviews, only six participated in the second round. In addition, three rounds of interviews had been planned, but only two were actually held, as all six participants in the second round indicated that they did not have any more information to add. So in the end, the hoped for sample size and number of interviews limited the amount of information obtained.

A second limitation was the inability to use most of the demographic information that could be obtained about the participants. Several of the participants were extremely concerned about any identifiers about them, their university, or their departments appearing in the study. This was due, it is assumed, to some negative comments made about their experiences as gatekeepers in their specific departments. They were assured that all information would be removed and a copy of the transcript (edited) was e-mailed to one of the most concerned participants. This researcher does understand the situation, having worked in several places where saying anything negative could result in either pressure or sanctions. But for this research project, it was a disappointment because it was felt that being able to more fully describe the participants would have resulted in a fuller picture of who said what, and maybe why. There would no doubt have been some interesting correlations. But the decision was made to use few identifiers, out of respect for the participants. But it is acknowledged that there was a loss of valuable information.

Implications for Future Research

There are several suggestions for future research. The main one would be that more qualitative work be done on the topic of gatekeeping. The stories of the participants in this study provide color and texture to the quantitative picture, flesh to the bones so to

speak. Larger samples and participants from around the country would expand the picture of what it is like to be a counselor educator.

It would also be interesting to examine why there were differences between gatekeepers, such as whether there is a connection between things like personality type or length of time in the field and gatekeeping practices. The literature and this research show that there are significant differences, and understanding the reasons for them could help improve the effectiveness of their efforts.

Though this research and all the literature focuses on the position of the gatekeeper him/herself, it would be interesting to examine the process from the student's point of view and what their experiences are of being involved in the gatekeeping process. What happened? What was it like? Was it useful or harmful? This additional facet could well allow for improvements in the process or application of the process, as the final goal is to make sure that students leaving counseling programs are effective and competent.

There also needs to be more research and development on instruments that would measure the effectiveness of counseling skills. Our participants as well as the literature indicate that there is a level of frustration and concern at not being able to quantify effectiveness. There is acknowledged stress at having to remove problematic students from a program based on less than scientifically developed criteria.

Summary

The focus of this study was what it was like to do gatekeeping, to be responsible for the quality of counseling students entering the field, to struggle to support impaired students in the hope that they will become effective counselors, and to ultimately be responsible for terminating impaired students from a counseling program. These shared stories and experiences of gatekeeping by counselor educators will hopefully add to the understanding of the gatekeeping process and highlight the impacts on counselor educators. It may also identify areas for change or improvement in gatekeeping policies and procedures, as well as potentially clarify the need for more departmental and university support for those who perform this most important function.

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