

# Reflections on Power From Feminist Counselor Educators



The Professional Counselor™  
Volume 12, Issue 3, Pages 185–197  
<http://tpcjournal.nbcc.org>  
© 2022 NBCC, Inc. and Affiliates  
doi: 10.15241/mjf.12.3.185

Melissa J. Fickling, Matthew Graden, Jodi L. Tangen

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how feminist-identified counselor educators understand and experience power in counselor education. Thirteen feminist women were interviewed. We utilized a loosely structured interview protocol to elicit participant experiences with the phenomenon of power in the context of counselor education. From these data, we identified an essential theme of analysis of power. Within this theme, we identified five categories: (a) definitions and descriptions of power, (b) higher education context and culture, (c) uses and misuses of power, (d) personal development around power, and (e) considerations of potential backlash. These categories and their subcategories are illustrated through narrative synthesis and participant quotations. Findings point to a pressing need for more rigorous self-reflection among counselor educators and counseling leadership, as well as greater accountability for using power ethically.

**Keywords:** counselor education, power, phenomenological, feminist, women

The American Counseling Association (ACA; 2014) defined counseling, in part, as “a professional relationship that empowers” (p. 20). Empowerment is a process that begins with awareness of power dynamics (McWhirter, 1994). Power is widely recognized in counseling’s professional standards, competencies, and best practices (ACA, 2014; Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES], 2011; Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015) as something about which counselors, supervisors, counselor educators, and researchers should be aware (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). However, little is known about how power is perceived by counselor educators who, by necessity, operate in many different professional roles with their students (e.g., teacher, supervisor, mentor).

In public discourse, power may carry different meaning when associated with men or women. According to a Pew Research Center poll (K. Walker et al., 2018) of 4,573 Americans, people are much more likely to use the word “powerful” in a positive way to describe men (67% positive) than women (8% positive). It is possible that these associations are also present among counselors-in-training, professional counselors, and counselor educators.

Dickens and colleagues (2016) found that doctoral students in counselor education are aware of power dynamics and the role of power in their relationships with faculty. Marginalized counselor educators, too, experienced a lack of power in certain academic contexts and noted the salience of their intersecting identities as relevant to the experience of power (Thacker et al., 2021). Thus, faculty members in counselor education may have a large role to play in socializing new professional counselors in awareness of power and positive uses of power, and thus could benefit from openly exploring uses of power in their academic lives.

---

Melissa J. Fickling, PhD, ACS, BC-TMH, LCPC, is an associate professor at Northern Illinois University. Matthew Graden, MEd, is a professional school counselor. Jodi L. Tangen is an associate professor at North Dakota State University. Correspondence may be addressed to Melissa J. Fickling, 1425 W. Lincoln Hwy, Gabel 200, DeKalb, IL 60115, [mfickling@niu.edu](mailto:mfickling@niu.edu).

## **Feminist Theory and Power in Counseling and Counselor Education**

The concept of power is explored most consistently in feminist literature (Brown, 1994; Miller, 2008). Although power is understood differently in different feminist spaces and disciplinary contexts (Lloyd, 2013), it is prominent, particularly in intersectional feminist work (Davis, 2008). In addition to examining and challenging hegemonic power structures, feminist theory also centers egalitarianism in relationships, attends to privilege and oppression along multiple axes of identity and culture, and promotes engagement in activism for social justice (Evans et al., 2005).

Most research about power in the helping professions to date has been focused on its use in clinical supervision. Green and Dekkers (2010) found discrepancies between supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of power and the degree to which supervisors attend to power in supervision. Similarly, Mangione and colleagues (2011) found another discrepancy in that power was discussed by all the supervisees they interviewed, but it was mentioned by only half of the supervisors. They noted that supervisors tended to minimize the significance of power or express discomfort with the existence of power in supervision.

Whereas most researchers of power and supervision have acknowledged the supervisor's power, Murphy and Wright (2005) found that both supervisors and supervisees have power in supervision and that when it is used appropriately and positively, power contributed to clinical growth and enhanced the supervisory relationship. Later, in an examination of self-identified feminist multicultural supervisors, Arczynski and Morrow (2017) found that anticipating and managing power was the core organizing category of their participants' practice. All other emergent categories in their study were different strategies by which supervisors anticipated and managed power, revealing the centrality of power in feminist supervision practice. Given the utility of these findings, it seems important to extend this line of research from clinical supervision to counselor education more broadly because counselor educators can serve as models to students regarding clinical and professional behavior. Thus, understanding the nuances of power could have implications for both pedagogy and clinical practice.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

Given the gendered nature of perceptions of power (Rudman & Glick, 2021; K. Walker et al., 2018), and the centrality of power in feminist scholarship (Brown, 1994; Lloyd, 2013; Miller, 2008), we decided to utilize a feminist framework in the design and execution of the present study. Because power appears to be a construct that is widely acknowledged in the helping professions but rarely discussed, we hope to shed light on the meaning and experience of power for counselor educators who identify as feminist. We utilized feminist self-identification as an eligibility criterion with the intention of producing a somewhat homogenous sample of counselor educators who were likely to have thought critically about the construct of power because it figures prominently in feminist theories and models of counseling and pedagogy (Brown, 1994; Lloyd, 2013; Miller, 2008).

### **Method**

We used a descriptive phenomenological methodology to help generate an understanding of feminist faculty members' lived experiences of power in the context of counselor education (Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Phenomenological analysis examines the individual experiences of participants and derives from them, via phenomenological reduction, the most meaningful shared elements to paint a portrait of the phenomenon for a group of people (Moustakas, 1994; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Thus, we share our findings by telling a cohesive narrative derived from the data via themes and subthemes identified by the researchers.

## Sample

After receiving IRB approval, we recruited counselor educators via the CESNET listserv who were full-time faculty members (e.g., visiting, clinical, instructor, tenure-track, tenured) in a graduate-level counseling program. We asked for participants of any gender who self-reported that they integrated a feminist framework into their roles as counselor educators. Thirteen full-time counselor educators who self-identified as feminist agreed to be interviewed on the topic of power. All participants were women. Two feminist-identified men expressed initial interest in participating but did not respond to multiple requests to schedule an interview. The researchers did not systematically collect demographic data, relying instead on voluntary participant self-disclosure of relevant demographics during the interviews. All participants were tenured or tenure-track faculty members. Most were at the assistant professor rank ( $n = 9$ ), a few were associate professors ( $n = 3$ ), and one was a full professor who also held various administrative roles during her academic career (e.g., department chair, dean). During the interviews, several participants expressed concern over the high potential for their identification by readers due to their unique identities, locations, and experiences. Thus, participants will be described only in aggregate and only with the demographic identifiers volunteered by them during the interviews. The participants who disclosed their race all shared they were White. Nearly all participants disclosed holding at least one marginalized identity along the axes of age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, or geography.

## Procedure

Once participants gave informed consent, phone interviews were scheduled. After consent to record was obtained, interviewers began the interviews, which lasted between 45–75 minutes. We utilized an unstructured interview format to avoid biasing the data collection to specific domains of counselor education while also aiming to generate the most personal and nuanced understandings of power directly from the participants' lived experiences (Englander, 2012). As experienced interviewers, we were confident in our ability to actively and meaningfully engage in discourse with participants via the following prompt: "We are interested in understanding power in counselor education. Specifically, please speak to your personal and/or professional development regarding how you think about and use power, and how you see power being used in counselor education." After the interviews, we all shared the task of transcribing the recordings verbatim, each transcribing several interviews. All potentially identifying information (e.g., names, institutional affiliations) was excluded from the interview transcripts.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis began via horizontalization of two interview transcripts by each author (Moustakas, 1994; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Next, we began clustering meaning units into potential categories (Moustakas, 1994). This initially revealed 21 potential categories, which we discussed in the first research team meeting. We kept research notes of our meetings, in which we summarized our ongoing data analysis processes (e.g., observations, wonderings, emerging themes). These notes helped us to revisit earlier thinking around thematic clustering and how categories interrelated. The notes did not themselves become raw data from which findings emerged. Through weekly discussions over the course of one year, the primary coders (Melissa Fickling and Matthew Graden) were able to refine the categories through dialoguing until consensus was reached, evidenced by verbal expression of mutual agreement. That is, the primary coders shared power in data analysis and sometimes tabled discussions when consensus was not reached so that each could reflect and rejoin the conversation later. As concepts were refined, early transcripts needed to be re-coded. Our attention was not on the quantification of participants or categories, but on understanding the essence of the experience of power (Englander, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The themes and subthemes in the findings section below were a fit for all transcripts by the end of data analysis.

## Researchers and Trustworthiness

Fickling and Jodi Tangen are White, cis-hetero women, and at the time of data analysis were pre-tenured counselor educators in their thirties who claimed a feminist approach in their work. Graden was a master's student and research assistant with scholarly interests in student experiences related to gender in counseling and education. We each possess privileged and marginalized identities, which facilitate certain perspectives and blind spots when it comes to recognizing power. Thus, regular meetings before, during, and after data collection and analysis were crucial to the epoche and phenomenological reduction processes (Moustakas, 1994) in which we shared our assumptions and potential biases. Fickling and Graden met weekly throughout data collection, transcription, and analysis. After the initial research design and data collection, Tangen served primarily as auditor to the coding process by comparing raw data to emergent themes at multiple time points, reviewing the research notes written by Fickling and Graden and contributing to consensus-building dialogues when needed.

Besides remaining cognizant of the strengths and limitations of our individual positionalities with the topic and data, we shared questions and concerns with each other as they arose during data analysis. Relevant to the topic of this study, Fickling served as an administrative supervisor to Graden. This required acknowledgement of power dynamics inherent in that relationship. Graden had been a doctoral student in another discipline prior to this study and thus had firsthand context for much of what was learned about power and its presence in academia. Fickling and Graden's relationship had not extended into the classroom or clinical supervision, providing a sort of boundary around potential complexities related to any dual relationships. To add additional trustworthiness to the findings below, we utilized thick descriptions to describe the phenomenon of interest while staying close to the data via quotations from participants. Finally, we discuss the impact and importance of the findings by highlighting implications for counselor educators.

## Findings

Through the analysis process, we concluded that the essence (Moustakas, 1994)—or core theme—of the experience of power for the participants in this study is engagement in a near constant *analysis of power*—that of their colleagues, peers, students, as well as of their own power. Participants analyzed interactions of power within and between various contexts and roles. They shared many examples of uses of power—both observed and personally enacted—which influenced their development, as well as their teaching and supervision styles. Through the interviews, participants shared the following: (a) definitions and descriptions of power, (b) higher education context and culture, (c) uses and misuses of power, (d) personal development around power, and (e) considerations of potential backlash. These five categories comprised the overarching theme of analysis of power and are described below with corresponding subcategories where applicable, identified in italics.

### Definitions and Descriptions of Power

Participants spent much of their time defining and describing just what they meant when they discussed power. For the feminist counselor educators in this study, power is about helping. One participant, when describing power, captured this sentiment well when she said, "I think of the ability to affect change and the ability to have a meaningful impact." Several participants shared this same idea by talking about power as the ability to have influence. Participants expressed a desire to use power to do good for others rather than to advance their personal aspirations or improve their positions. Use of power for self-promotion was referenced to a far lesser extent than using power to promote justice and equity, and any self-promotional use was generally in response to perceived personal injustice or exploitation. At times, participants described power by what it is not. One

participant said, “I don’t see power as a negative. I think it can be used negatively.” Several others shared this sentiment and described power as a responsibility.

In describing power, participants identified *feelings of empowerment/disempowerment* (Table 1). Disempowerment was described with feeling words that captured a sense of separation and helplessness. Empowerment, on the other hand, was described as feeling energetic and connected. Not only was the language markedly different, but the shifts in vocal expression were also notable (nonverbals were not visible) when participants discussed empowerment versus disempowerment. Disempowerment sounded like defeat (e.g., breathy, monotone, low energy) whereas empowerment sounded like liveliness (e.g., resonant, full intonation, energetic).

**Table 1**

*Empowered and Disempowered Descriptors*

Descriptors	
Empowered	Disempowered
Authentic	Isolated
Free	Disenfranchised
Good	Anxious
Heard	Separated Identity
Congruent	Not Accepted
Genuine	Disheartened
Selfless	Helpless
Hopeful	Small
Confident	Weak
Serene	Invisible
Connected	Wasting Energy
Grounded	Tired
Energized	Powered Down

Participants identified various *types of power*, including personal, positional, and institutional power. Personal power was seen as the source of the aspirational kinds of power these participants desired for themselves and others. It can exist regardless of positional or institutional power. Positional power provides the ability to influence decisions, and it is earned over time. The last type of power, institutional, is explored more through the next theme labeled *higher education context and culture*.

### **Higher Education Context and Culture**

Because the focus of the study was power within counselor educators’ roles, it was impossible for participants not to discuss the context of their work environments. Thus, *higher education context and culture* became a salient subtheme in our findings. Higher education culture was described as “the way things are done in institutions of higher learning.” Participants referred to written/spoken and unwritten/silent rules, traditions, expectations, norms, and practices of the academic context as barriers to empowerment, though not insurmountable ones. Power was seen as intimately intertwined with

difficult departmental relationships as well as the roles of rank and seniority for nearly all participants. Most also acknowledged the influence of broader sociocultural norms (i.e., local, state, national) on higher education in general, noting that institutions themselves are impacted by power dynamics.

One participant who said that untenured professors have much more power than they realize also said that “power in academia comes with rank.” This contradiction highlights the tension inherent in power, at least among those who wish to use it for the “greater good” (as stated by multiple participants) rather than for personal gain, as these participants expressed.

More than one participant described power as a form of currency in higher education. This shared experience of power as currency, either through having it or not having it, demonstrated that to gain power to do good, as described above, one must be willing or able to be seen as acceptable within the system that assigns power. Boldness was seen by participants as something that can happen once power is gained. Among non-tenured participants, this quote captures the common sentiment: “Now, once I get tenure, that can be a different conversation. I think I would feel more emboldened, more safe, if you will, to confront a colleague in that way.” The discussion of context and boldness led to the emergence of a third theme, which we titled *uses and misuses of power*.

### Uses and Misuses of Power

Participants provided many examples of their perceptions of uses and misuses of power and linked these behaviors to their sense of ethics. Because many of the examples of uses of power were personal, unique, and potentially identifiable, participants asked that they not be shared individually in this manuscript. Ethical uses of power were described as specific ways in which participants remembered power being used for good such as intervention in unfair policies on behalf of students. Ethical uses of power shared the characteristics of being collaborative and aligned with the descriptors of “feeling empowered” (Table 1).

In contrast, misuses of power were described in terms of being unethical. These behaviors existed on a spectrum that ranged from a simple lack of awareness to a full-blown abuse of power on the most harmful end of the continuum. Lack of awareness of power, for these participants, was observed quite frequently among their counselor education colleagues and they noted that people can negatively affect others without realizing it. In some cases, they reported seeing colleagues lack cultural awareness, competence, or an awareness of privilege. Although many colleagues cognitively know about privilege and speak about it, the lack of awareness referred to here is in terms of the behavioral use of privilege to the detriment of those with less privilege. One example would be to call oneself an LGBTQ+ ally without actively demonstrating ally behavior like confronting homophobic or cis-sexist language in class. Moving along the spectrum, misuses of power were described as unfairly advantaging oneself, possibly at the expense or disadvantage of another. Misuses of power may or may not be directly or immediately harmful but still function to concentrate power rather than share it. An example shared was when faculty members insist that students behave in ways that are culturally inconsistent for that student. At the other end of the spectrum, abuses of power are those behaviors that directly cause harm. Even though abuses of power can be unintentional, participants emphasized that intentions matter less than effects. One participant described abuses of power she had observed as “people using power to make others feel small.” For example, a professor or instructor minimizing students’ knowledge or experiences serves to silence students and leads to a decreased likelihood the student shares, causing classmates to lose out on that connection and knowledge.

One participant shared a culture of ongoing misuses of power by a colleague: “And then they’re [students] all coming to me crying, you know, surreptitiously coming to me in my office, like, ‘Can I talk to you?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, shut the door. What’d he do now?’ I’m happy to be a safe person for them, it’s an honor, but this is ridiculous.” The irony of feeling powerless to stop another’s misuses of power was not lost on the participants. One participant expressed that she wished to see more colleagues ask questions about their use of power:

We have to ask the question, “What is the impact? What is happening, what are the patterns?” We have to ask questions about access and participation and equity. . . . And from my perspective, we have to assume that things are jacked up because we know that any system is a microcosm of the outer world, and the outer world is jacked up. So, we have to ask these questions and understand if there’s an adverse impact. And a lot of time there is on marginalized or minoritized populations. So, what are we going to do about it? It’s all well and good to see it, but what are we doing about it, you know? . . . How are you using your power for good?

### **Personal Development Around Power**

Participants reflected deeply on their own development of their thinking about and use of power. All participants spoke early in the interviews about their training as counselors and counselor educators. Their early training was often where they first fully realized their feminist orientation and recognized a need for greater feminist multicultural dialogue and action in counseling. Participants were all cognizant of their inherent personal power but still not immune to real and perceived attempts to limit their expression of it. In general, participants felt that over time they became more able and willing to use their power in ethical ways. One participant shared the following about her change in understanding power over time:

I’ve never really been a power-focused person, and so I just don’t know that I saw it around me much before that. Which now I realize is a total construct of my privilege—that I’ve never had to see it. Then I started realizing that “Oh, there’s power all around me.” And people obsessed with power all around me. And then once I saw it, I kind of couldn’t un-see it. I think for a long time I went through a process of disillusionment, and I think I still lapse back into that sometimes where I’ll realize like, a lot of the people in positions of power around me are power-hungry or power-obsessed, and they’re using power in all the wrong ways. And maybe they don’t even have an awareness of it. You know, I don’t think everybody who’s obsessed with power knows that about themselves. It almost seems like a compulsion more than anything. And I think that’s super dangerous.

Nearly all participants reflected on their experiences of powerlessness as students and how they now attempt to empower students as a result of their experiences. Working to build a sense of safety in the classroom was a major behavior that they endorsed, often because of their own feelings of a lack of safety in learning contexts at both master’s and doctoral levels. Vulnerability and risk-taking on the part of the counselor educator were seen as evidence that efforts to create safety in the classroom were successful. Speaking about this, one participant said:

I think it’s actually very unethical and irresponsible as a counselor educator to throw students in a situation where you expect them to take all these risks and not have worked to create community and environments that are conducive to that.

Participant feelings toward power varied considerably. One said, “I think overall I feel fairly powerful. But I don’t want a lot of power. I don’t like it.” One participant shared, “I am not shy, I am not afraid to speak and so sometimes maybe I do take up too much space, and there are probably times for whatever reason I don’t take up as much space as I should,” showing both humility and a comfort with her own power. These quotes show the care with which the participants came to think about their own power as they gained it through education, position, and rank. No participants claimed to feel total ease in their relationship with their own power, though most acknowledged that with time, they had become more comfortable with acknowledging and using their power when necessary.

One participant said of her ideal expression of power: “Part of feeling powerful is being able to do what I do reasonably well, not perfect, just reasonably well. But also helping to foster the empowerment of other people is just excellent. That’s where it’s at.” This developmental place with her own power aligns with the aspirational definitions and descriptions of power shared above.

Along with their personal development around power, participants shared how their *awareness of privileged and marginalized statuses* raised their understanding of power. Gender and age were cited by nearly all participants as being relevant to their personal experiences with power. Namely, participants identified the intersection of their gender and young age as being used as grounds for having their contributions or critiques dismissed by their male colleagues. Older age seemed to afford some participants the confidence and power needed to speak up. One participant said:

We are talking about a profession that is three-quarters women, and we are not socialized to grab power, to take power. And so, I think all of that sometimes is something we need to be mindful of and kind of keep stretching ourselves to address.

Yet when younger participants recalled finding the courage to address power imbalances with their colleagues, the outcome was almost always denial and continued disempowerment. To this point, one participant asked, “How do we get power to matter to people who are already in the positions where they hold power and aren’t interested in doing any self-examination or critical thinking about the subject?”

Finally, power was described as permeating every part of being an educator. To practice her use of power responsibly, one participant said, “I mean every decision I make has to, at some point, consider what my power is with them [the students].” Related to the educator role, in general, participants shared their personal development with gatekeeping, such as:

I think one of the areas that I often feel in my power is around gatekeeping. And I think that is also an area where power can be grossly abused. But I think it’s just such an important part of what we do. And I think one of the ways that I feel in my power around gatekeeping is because it’s something I don’t do alone. I make a point to consult a lot because I don’t want to misuse power, and I think gatekeeping—and, really, like any use of power I think—is stronger when it’s done with others.

Again, this quote reflects the definition of power that emerged in this study as ideally being “done *with others*.” Gatekeeping is where participants seemed to be most aware of power and to initially have had the most anxiety around power, but also the area in which they held the most conviction about the intentional use of power. The potential cost of not responsibly using their power in gatekeeping was to



future clients, so participants pushed through their discomfort to ensure competent and ethical client care. However, in many cases, participants had to seriously weigh the pros and cons of asserting their personal or positional power, as described in the next and final category.

### **Considerations of Potential Backlash**

Participants shared about the energy they spent in weighing the potential backlash to their expressions of power, or their calling out of unethical uses of power. Anticipated backlash often resulted in participants not doing or saying something for fear of “making waves” or being labeled a “troublemaker.” Participants described feeling a need to balance confrontations of perceived misuses of power with their desire not to be seen as combative. Those participants who felt most comfortable confronting problematic behaviors cited an open and respectful workplace and self-efficacy in their ability to influence change effectively. For those who did not describe their workplaces as safe and respectful, fear was a common emotion cited when considering whether to take action to challenge a student or colleague. Many described a lack of support from colleagues when they did speak up. Some described support behind the scenes but an unwillingness of peers to be more vocal and public in their opposition to a perceived wrong. Of this, one participant said, “And so getting those voices . . . to the table seems like an uphill battle. I feel like I’m stuck in middle management, in a way.”

### **Discussion**

For the participants in this study, analysis of power is a process of productive tension and fluidity. Participants acknowledged that power exists and a power differential in student–teacher and supervisee–supervisor relationships will almost certainly always be present. Power seemed to be described as an organizing principle in nearly all contexts—professionally, institutionally, departmentally, in the classroom, in supervision, and in personal relationships. Participants found power to be ever present but rarely named (Miller, 2008). Engaging with these data from these participants, it seems that noticing and naming power and its effects is key to facilitating personal and professional development in ways that are truly grounded in equity, multiculturalism, and social justice. Participants affirmed what is stated in guiding frameworks of counseling (ACA, 2014) and counselor education (ACES, 2011; CACREP, 2015) and went beyond a surface acknowledgement of power to a deeper and ongoing process of analysis, like Bernard and Goodyear’s (2014) treatment of power in the supervisory context.

Contemplating, reflecting on, and working with power are worthwhile efforts according to the participants in this study, which is supported by scholarly literature on the topic (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Participants’ personal and professional growth seemed to be catalyzed by their awareness of gender and power dynamics. Participants expressed a desire for a greater recognition of the role of power and the ways in which it is distributed in our professional contexts. For example, although mentioned by only two participants, dissatisfaction in professional associations—national, regional, and state—was shared. Specifically, there was a desire to see counselor educators with positional power make deliberate and visible efforts to bring greater diversity into professional-level decisions and discussions in permanent, rather than tokenizing, ways.

The ongoing process of self-analysis that counselors and educators purport to practice seemed not to be enough to ensure that faculty will not misuse power. Though gender and age were highly salient aspects of perceptions of power for these women, neither were clear predictors of their colleagues’ ethical or unethical use of power. Women and/or self-identified feminist counselor educators can and do use power in problematic ways at times. In fact, most participants expressed

disappointment in women colleagues and leaders who were unwilling to question power or critically examine their role in status quo power relations. This is consistent with research that indicates that as individual power and status are gained, awareness of power can diminish (Keltner, 2016).

These feminist counselor educators described feelings of empowerment as those that enhance connection and collaboration rather than positionality. In fact, participants' reports of frustration with some uses of power seemed to be linked to people in leadership positions engaging in power-over moves (Miller, 2008). Participants reported spending a significant amount of energy in deciding whether and when to challenge perceived misuses of power. Confronting leaders seemed to be the riskiest possibility, but confronting peers was also a challenge for many participants. The acknowledgement of context emerged in these data, including a recognition that power works within and between multiple socioecological levels (e.g., microsystems, mesosystems, macrosystems; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The culture of academia and higher education also contributed to unique considerations of power in the present study, which aligns with the findings of Thacker and colleagues (2021), who noted counselor educator experiences of entrenched power norms are resistant to change.

Contextualizing these findings in current literature is difficult given the lack of work on this topic in counselor education. However, our themes are similar to those found in the supervision literature (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017; Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). The participants in our study were acutely aware of power in their relationships; however, they appeared to feel it even more when in a power-down position. This finding is similar to research in the supervision context in which supervisees felt as though power was not being addressed by their supervisors (Green & Dekkers, 2010). Further, just as the supervisors researched in Mangione et al.'s (2011) study attended to power analysis, our participants strived to examine their power with students. The distinction between positive and negative uses of power was consistent with Murphy and Wright (2005). Participants conceptualized power on a continuum, attended to the power inherent in gatekeeping decisions, managed the tension between collaboration and direction, engaged in reflection around use and misuse of power, and sought transparency in discussions around power. More than anything, though, our participants seemed to continually wrestle with the inherent complexity of power, similarly to what Arczynski and Morrow (2017) found, and how to address, manage, and work with it in a respectful, ethical manner. As opposed to these studies, though, our research addresses a gap between the profession's acknowledgement of power as a phenomenon and actual lived experiences of power by counselor educators who claim a feminist lens in their work.

### **Implications**

The implications of our findings are relevant across multiple roles (e.g., faculty, administration, supervision) and levels (e.g., institution, department, program) in counselor education. Power analysis at each level and each role in which counselor educators find themselves could help to uncover issues of power and its uses, both ethical and problematic. The considerable effort that participants described in weighing whether to challenge perceived misuses of power indicates the level of work needed to make power something emotionally and professionally safe to address. Thus, those who find themselves in positions of power or having earned power through tenure and seniority are potentially better situated to invite discussions of power in relatively safe settings such as program meetings or in one-on-one conversations with colleagues. Further, at each hierarchical level, individuals can engage in critical self-reflection while groups can elicit external, independent feedback from people trained to observe and name unjust power structures. Counselor educators should not assume that because they identify as feminist, social justice-oriented, or egalitarian that their professional behavior is always reflective of their aspirations. It is not enough to claim an

identity; one must work to let one's actions and words demonstrate one's commitment to inclusion through sensitivity to and awareness of power.

Additionally, we encourage counselor educators to ask for feedback from people who will challenge them because self-identification of uses or misuses of power is likely not sufficient to create systemic or even individual change. It is important to acknowledge that power is differentially assigned but can be used well in a culture of collaboration and support. Just as we ask our students to be honest and compassionately critical of their own development, as individuals and as a profession, it seems we could be doing more to foster empowerment through support, collaboration, and honest feedback.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although not all participants disclosed all their demographic identifiers, one limitation to the current study is the relative homogeneity of the sample across racial and gender lines. The predominance of White women in the present study is of concern, and there are a few possible reasons for this. One is that White women are generally overrepresented in the counseling profession. Baggerly and colleagues (2017) found that women comprised 85% of the student body in CACREP-accredited programs but only 60% of the faculty. These numbers indicate both the high representation of women seeking counseling degrees, but also the degree to which men approach, but do not reach, parity with women in holding faculty positions. Further, in Baggerly et al.'s study, about 88% of faculty members in CACREP-accredited programs were White.

Another potential reason for the apparent racial homogeneity in the present sample is that people of color may not identify with a feminist orientation because of the racist history of feminist movements and so would not have volunteered to participate. Thus, findings must be considered in this context. Future researchers should be vocally inclusive of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990) and Womanism (A. Walker, 1983) in their research design and recruitment processes to communicate to potential participants an awareness of the intersections of race and gender. Further, future research should explicitly invite those underrepresented here—namely, women of color and men faculty members—to share their experiences with and conceptualizations of power. This will be extremely important as counselor educators work to continue to diversify the profession of counseling in ways that are affirming and supportive for all.

Another limitation is that participants may have utilized socially desirable responses when discussing power and their own behavior. Indeed, the participants identified a lack of self-awareness as common among those who misused power. At the same time, however, the participants in this study readily shared their own missteps, lending credibility to their self-assessments. Future research that asks participants to track their interactions with power in real time via journals or repeated quantitative measures could be useful in eliciting more embodied experiences of power as they arise in vivo. Likewise, students' experiences of power in their interactions with counselor educators would be useful, particularly as they relate to teaching or gatekeeping, because some research already exists examining power in the context of clinical supervision (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017; Green & Dekkers, 2010; Mangione et al., 2011; Murphy & Wright, 2005).

We initially embarked upon this study with a simple inquiry, wondering about others' invisible experiences around what felt like a formidable topic. More than anything, our discussions with our participants seemed to indicate a critical need for further exploration of power across hierarchical levels and institutions. We are grateful for our participants' willingness to share their stories, and we hope that this is just the beginning of a greater dialogue.

**Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure**

The authors reported no conflict of interest or funding contributions for the development of this manuscript.

**References**

- American Counseling Association. (2014). *ACA code of ethics*.
- Arczynski, A. V., & Morrow, S. L. (2017). The complexities of power in feminist multicultural psychotherapy supervision. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 64*(2), 192–205. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000179>
- Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Taskforce on Best Practices in Clinical Supervision. (2011, April). *Best practices in clinical supervision*. <https://acesonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ACES-Best-Practices-in-Clinical-Supervision-2011.pdf>
- Baggerly, J., Tan, T. X., Pichotta, D., & Warner, A. (2017). Race, ethnicity, and gender of faculty members in APA- and CACREP-accredited programs: Changes over five decades. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 45*(4), 292–303. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12079>
- Bernard, J. M., & Goodyear, R. K. (2014). *Fundamentals of clinical supervision* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Brown, L. S. (1994). *Subversive dialogues: Theory in feminist therapy*. Basic Books.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2015). *2016 CACREP standards*. <https://www.cacrep.org/for-programs/2016-cacrep-standards>
- Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory, 9*(1), 67–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086364>
- Dickens, K. N., Ebrahim, C. H., & Herlihy, B. (2016). Counselor education doctoral students' experiences with multiple roles and relationships. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 55*(4), 234–249. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12051>
- Englander, M. (2012). The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 43*(1), 13–35. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916212X632943>
- Evans, K. M., Kincade, E. A., Marbley, A. F., & Seem, S. R. (2005). Feminism and feminist therapy: Lessons from the past and hopes for the future. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 83*(3), 269–277. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2005.tb00342.x>
- Green, M. S., & Dekkers, T. D. (2010). Attending to power and diversity in supervision: An exploration of supervisee learning outcomes and satisfaction with supervision. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 22*(4), 293–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2010.528703>
- Keltner, D. (2016). *The power paradox: How we gain and lose influence*. Penguin.
- Lloyd, M. (2013). Power, politics, domination, and oppression. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, & S. Laurel Weldon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of gender and politics* (pp. 111–134). Oxford University Press.
- Mangione, L., Mears, G., Vincent, W., & Hawes, S. (2011). The supervisory relationship when women supervise women: An exploratory study of power, reflexivity, collaboration, and authenticity. *The Clinical Supervisor, 30*(2), 141–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07325223.2011.604272>
- McWhirter, E. H. (1994). *Counseling for empowerment*. American Counseling Association.
- Miller, J. B. (2008). Telling the truth about power. *Women & Therapy, 31*(2–4), 145–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703140802146282>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE.
- Murphy, M. J., & Wright, D. W. (2005). Supervisees' perspectives of power use in supervision. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*(3), 283–295. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2005.tb01569.x>

- Padilla-Díaz, M. (2015). Phenomenology in educational qualitative research: Philosophy as science or philosophical science? *International Journal of Educational Excellence*, 1(2), 101–110. [https://documento.uagm.edu/cupey/ijee/ijee\\_padilla\\_diaz\\_1\\_2\\_101-110.pdf](https://documento.uagm.edu/cupey/ijee/ijee_padilla_diaz_1_2_101-110.pdf)
- Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (2021). *The social psychology of gender: How power and intimacy shape gender relations* (2nd ed.). Guilford.
- Starks, H., & Trinidad, S. B. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1372–1380. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1049732307307031>
- Thacker, N. E., Barrio Minton, C. A., & Riley, K. B. (2021). Marginalized counselor educators' experiences negotiating identity: A narrative inquiry. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 60(2), 94–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12198>
- Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Harcourt Brace.
- Walker, K., Bialik, K., & van Kessel, P. (2018). *Strong men, caring women: How Americans describe what society values (and doesn't) in each gender*. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/interactives/strong-men-caring-women>

