# SUPERVISOR EMOTIONAL MATURITY, PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, AND TRAUMATIC STRESS IN COLLEGE STUDENT AFFAIRS

**R. Jason Lynch**
Appalachian State University

**Chelsea Gilbert**

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic placed an immense amount of stress on student affairs professionals, who were exposed to numerous potentially traumatic events as a result of changing workplace environments, health and safety risks, and their emotional support of students. This study explored the impact of supervisor emotional maturity on supervisee trauma exposure response through the mediating effect of psychological safety for a sample of student affairs professionals employed at 4-year institutions. Results indicated that supervisees who felt that their supervisors were more emotionally mature felt more psychologically safe and that this psychological safety predicted lower adverse reactions to both primary and secondary traumatic stress in workplace contexts. Implications for the training and development of student affairs supervisors are explored, as well as for further research into the construct of emotional maturity as it relates to supervision.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought numerous challenges for those working in college student affairs. As campuses quickly transitioned to online learning, many student affairs practitioners were forced, almost immediately, to re-envision their work within a completely virtual context (Burke, 2020; Lederman, 2020a; Lederman, 2020b) while also managing both their students' and their responses to the global health crisis (Copeland et al., 2021; Turk et al., 2020). In many cases, student affairs practitioners were also forced to reckon with potential job loss and furlough as campus administrators dealt with budget fallouts from fears of declining enrollments (Douglas-Gabriel & Flowers, 2020). As the pandemic progressed, colleges and universities continued to give and receive mixed messages regarding plans to return to campus and safety protocols (Smith, 2020), creating chaotic work environments and an unpredictable future. These conditions, in conjunction with continued incidents of racial violence (Lu & Sheng, 2020; Philimon, 2020) and disasters related to climate change (Smith, 2021), created circumstances for *primary trauma* (direct exposure to potentially traumatic events) where many student affairs practitioners were pushed past their capacity to cope. Additionally, in light of the additional support they are providing to students as a result of these crises, student affairs practitioners are also at risk of experiencing *secondary trauma*, which refers to the toll that caring for others can take on one's emotional and psychological well-being (Knight, 2010; note that similar language has been used to describe this phenomenon, including "indirect trauma" and "vicarious trauma"; we use the term "secondary trauma" throughout this manuscript).

As student affairs practitioners and leaders seek to make meaning of these ongoing crises, it is important to also explore the conditions that exacerbated or mitigated both primary and secondary trauma within this community. Trauma exposure is connected with burnout and attrition (Cieslak

et al., 2014; Lynch & Glass, 2018, 2020; Knight, 2010), ever-present challenges within student affairs given the impact of the so-called Great Resignation (BusinessWire, 2022). These challenges are further compounded by growing mental health challenges faced by college students (Shalka, 2019) alongside limited resources for collegiate mental health support (Abrams, 2022), which has resulted in greater demands placed upon student affairs practitioners and, therefore, greater risk of secondary trauma (Lynch & Glass, 2018, 2020). Supervision has been identified in emerging literature as a promising protective strategy for student affairs practitioners facing both primary and secondary trauma (Gilbert & Burden, 2022). However, many student affairs supervisors are underprepared for their roles (Calhoun & Nasser, 2013), and recommendations for effective trauma-informed supervisory practices in higher education are still emergent (Gilbert, 2022a; Gilbert, 2022b). Scholars outside of higher education have identified that supervisors may impact their employees' responses to workplace trauma by applying *trauma-informed supervision*, a framework that incorporates the broader principles of trauma-informed practice--safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment—into supervisory relationships (Berger & Quiros, 2014; Fallot, 2011; Thompson et al., 2014).

Relatedly, existing scholarship outside the realm of higher education has also argued the importance of psychological safety as a key component for healing trauma and preventing retraumatization (Reeves et al., 2010). Within a workplace, psychological safety can be defined as an environment "[where] employees feel safe to voice ideas, willingly seek feedback, provide honest feedback, collaborate, take risks, and experiment" (Newman et al., 2017, p. 521). The construct of emotional maturity (Gibson, 2015) offers a helpful framework for understanding the effectiveness of supervisory practices in establishing psychological safety in the midst of a traumatic environment and has potential implications for student affairs supervisors

(and those who hire and develop them) to become a sought-after skill.

In order to explore the connection between the emotional maturity of college student affairs supervisors and practitioners sense of workplace psychological safety, we were guided by the following questions: To what degree do U.S. college student affairs professionals feel psychologically safe at work? How do U.S. college student affairs professionals perceive the emotional maturity of their supervisors? How does supervisor emotional maturity and staff sense of psychological safety relate to trauma exposure response in a sample of U.S. college student affairs professionals?

## Literature Review

For the purposes of this study, trauma is defined as "any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning" (American Psychological Association, 2020, para. 1). Traumatic events may be acute, such as experiencing violence or a life-threatening natural disaster, or chronic, such as sustained exposure to a high-stress environment or a long-term crisis. Acute or chronic trauma exposure can lead to significant adverse mental and physical health outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998). The COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing impact on populations worldwide have been experienced by many, including student affairs professionals, as chronic forms of primary trauma (Masiero et al., 2020; Miller, 2020).

### COVID-19 and Primary Trauma for Student Affairs Professionals

Uncertain or certain exposure to COVID-19, fears about infecting coworkers, clients, or family members with the virus, and *moral injury*, which refers to emotional distress resulting from taking actions that violate one's own values (Williamson et al., 2020), may constitute primary trauma

for student affairs professionals as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Benhamou & Piedra, 2020). Specifically, many student affairs staff have reported to campuses with high numbers of COVID-19 cases while facing threats of job loss (Douglas-Gabriel & Flowers, 2020), a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), reduced hours, and a lack of clear communication from campus administration (Smith, 2020). Student affairs staff members' traumatic experiences may also be exacerbated by intergenerational, historical, and collective trauma already experienced by communities of color in the United States (Barlow, 2018; Watson et al., 2016; Yang & Dinh, 2018), particularly in light of increased anti-Black and anti-Asian sentiment rampant in 2020 (Misra et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2021).

### COVID-19 and Secondary Trauma for Student Affairs Professionals

Juxtaposed with the troubling realities of student affairs professionals' primary traumatic experiences in the wake of COVID-19 are their potential experiences with secondary trauma as a result of being positioned as "trauma support interventionists" (Lynch & Glass, 2020; p. 1045) for a college student population in which trauma is pervasive (Shalka, 2019). Professionals working in student affairs and higher education are often tasked with supporting students through various traumas and crises (Lynch & Glass, 2018); prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, over half of student affairs professionals in one survey reported frequently supporting college students through traumatic events (Lynch & Glass, 2018). This emotionally intense work can lead to experiences of secondary traumatic stress, including compassion fatigue and burnout (Lynch & Glass, 2018, 2020; Knight, 2010); other negative impacts of secondary trauma include anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, and hypervigilance, mirroring symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Though not well-studied in higher education settings (Lynch, 2017; Stoves, 2014), the

impact of secondary trauma has been found in clinical settings to have implications not only for professionals' well-being but also the well-being of those in their care (Cieslak et al., 2014). Thus, student affairs professionals' experiences of secondary trauma could have implications for the students that they aspire to serve, heightening the importance of better understanding and treating trauma-related responses within student affairs as well as the importance of incorporating a trauma-informed systemic approach to higher education institutions (Shalka, 2015). One potential method for lessening trauma-related responses is through supervision, which has been connected to trauma responses among student affairs professionals (Gilbert & Burden, 2022; Lynch, 2017; Stoves, 2014).

## Student Affairs Supervision

Supervision has been established as a critical component of student affairs practitioner success (Arminio & Creamer, 2001; Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009; Winston & Creamer, 1997). Despite this, literature empirically examining supervision in student affairs and higher education settings is sparse and often highlights the problematic reality that student affairs supervisors frequently receive little or no training in how to supervise others (Calhoun & Nasser, 2013; Shupp & Arminio, 2012). Many student affairs staff report dissatisfaction with their quality of supervision (Renn & Hodges, 2007), which can lead to high rates of burnout and attrition (Barham & Winston, 2006; Tull, 2006). Additionally, student affairs supervisors tend to supervise others in the same way that they have been supervised; thus, ineffective supervisory practices are often replicated throughout generations of supervisees (Barham & Winston, 2006).

Further exacerbating these challenges, supervisors within higher education and student affairs frequently aspire toward "neutrality" across categories including race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, ignoring the impacts of social identity on staff lived experiences and on supervisory relationships (Brown et al., 2019; Burden et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019); indeed, some of the leading models for student affairs supervisory practice do not mention identity or power (Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Winston & Creamer, 1997). This so-called neutral approach is especially problematic for student affairs staff members with minoritized racial identities, who are more likely than their white counterparts to experience race-related macro- and microaggressions in their workplaces (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Carter, 2019). The impact of these microaggressions--along with other potentially traumatic experiences--may be mitigated by supervision (Knight, 2013) and power- and identity-conscious forms of student affairs supervision in particular (Brown et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019), including supervision informed by feminist theory (Gilbert & Burden, 2022), are especially promising for reducing the negative impacts of trauma exposure response.

## Supervision and Trauma

Literature examining connections between supervision and student affairs professional trauma is still emergent (Gilbert, 2022a; Gilbert, 2022b; Gilbert & Burden, 2022); however, clinical counseling literature suggests that supervision has the potential to either exacerbate or mitigate the negative impacts of secondary trauma (Berger & Quiros, 2014; Callender & Lenz, 2018; Davis et al., 1989). For example, more severe impacts of secondary trauma have been associated with ineffective supervision of therapists (Knight, 2013), while mental health supervisors who model sustainable approaches to trauma work have been found to cultivate greater resilience in their supervisees (Sommer, 2008). Additionally, supervisees in counseling professions tend to have a higher professional quality of life when their supervisors take a trauma-informed approach (Callender & Lenz, 2018). Trauma-informed supervision is comprised of five interlocking elements: safety, trust, choice, empowerment, and collaboration (Gilbert, 2022a; Gilbert, 2022b; Berger & Quiros,

2014; Fallot, 2011), briefly described below.

### Safety

Safety in a trauma-informed supervisory relationship is relational, psychological, and emotional (Gilbert, 2022b; Quiros & Berger, 2013). In order to cultivate an environment of safety, supervisors must be attuned to power dynamics with their supervisees as well as practice intentional empathy when it comes to supervisee experiences (Gilbert, 2022b). This may require a more expansive understanding of trauma (beyond purely clinical diagnoses) that acknowledges the ongoing lack of safety that many minoritized communities face as a result of systems of white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia (Gilbert, 2022b; Quiros & Berger, 2013; Stevens, 2009).

### Trust

A trusting supervisory relationship requires that supervisors model vulnerability and create space to cultivate open and honest communication with their supervisees (Gilbert, 2022b; Quiros & Berger, 2013). This is especially critical for supervisors who hold one or more privileged identities and whose supervisees hold one or more minoritized identities; openly discussing the power imbalances that can exist as a result of these identities and working to disrupt oppressive structures is a crucial form of trust-building (Gilbert, 2022b).

### Choice

Traumatic experiences often involve a forced removal of agency from survivors (Fallot, 2011); thus, establishing an environment of agency and choice is a key component of trauma-informed supervision (Quiros & Berger, 2013). This is a stark departure from more top-down models of supervision and instead demands a more reciprocal relationship structure where supervisors and supervisees co-create the conditions of their relationship (Gilbert, 2022b). It also requires supervisors to "attend to both relational and structural conditions that limit the agency of their supervis-

ees" (Gilbert, 2022a, p. 176).

### Empowerment

Trauma-informed supervisors empower their supervisees by advocating on their behalf as well as using supervisory conversations as a means of cultivating critical consciousness (Gilbert, 2022b; Quiros & Berger, 2013). Additionally, intentional effort is needed to disrupt the hierarchical nature of higher education institutions and to elevate the experiences and wisdom of supervisees. By positioning themselves as both a teacher and a learner, a supervisor can affirm their supervisees as "valuable and valid sources of knowledge" (Gilbert, 2022b, p. 27).

### Collaboration

Finally, a collaborative trauma-informed supervisory relationship involves frequent intentional conversations about supervisee needs (Gilbert, 2022b) and the impact of trauma on their lives and well-being (Quiros & Berger, 2013). Collaboration requires mutual respect, often developed over time as a result of dedicated space for these conversations (Gilbert, 2022b), which are the responsibility of a supervisor to initiate (Gilbert, 2022a). As a result, collaborative problem-solving can occur along with growth for all parties involved (Quiros & Berger, 2013).

In summary, supervisors committed to a trauma-informed approach have a style characterized by open and reflexive dialogue and aim to foster a mutually respectful interpersonal climate with their supervisees by using a collaborative approach (Berger & Quiros, 2014; Varghese, 2018). A trauma-informed supervisory style has significant overlap with the construct of emotional maturity.

## Conceptual Framework

This study examined student affairs professionals' perceptions of their supervisors using the conceptual framework of emotional maturity. *Emotional maturity* is a construct that refers to

a person's capacity for "thinking objectively and conceptually while sustaining deep emotional connections to others" (Gibson, 2015, p. 27). Importantly, emotional maturity is conceptually distinct from *emotional intelligence*, which is defined as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1989, p. 189); emotionally mature individuals are emotionally intelligent, but emotionally intelligent individuals are not necessarily emotionally mature (Christy, 2019). Emotionally mature individuals have a high degree of *empathy* the ability to resonate with the feelings of others (Ekman & Halpern, 2015), and therefore are able to ensure that others feel safe in relationships (Goleman, 1995). Emotionally immature individuals, on the other hand, tend to be rigid and single-minded, have low-stress tolerance, and are self-preoccupied; additionally, they have limited vocabulary for their own emotions, tending to act out their needs rather than talking about them (Hatfield et al., 2009). In the seminal text on emotional maturity, Gibson (2015) conceptualizes emotionally mature individuals as displaying the following characteristics (p.179):

- Realistic and reliable
- Work with reality
- Feel and think at the same time
- Consistent in action and emotional re sponse across varying situations
- Does not take things personally
- Respectful and cooperative
- Respect boundaries
- Flexible and willing to compromise
- Even-tempered
- Willing to be influenced by others
- Truthful
- Apologize and seek to make amends when wrong or have made a mistake
- Responsive, empathetic, and evoke the feeling of being seen and understood
- Reflective and willing to change

While Gibson (2015) focuses on parenting, to date, there are no published studies applying the concept of emotional maturity in a supervision context, though there are some instances in the psychotherapeutic literature that emphasize supervisors' role in helping their supervisees develop emotional maturity (e.g., Aponte & Carlsen, 2009; Overholser, 2004). However, emergent scholarship on healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic has identified supervisory style as a key contributor to psychological safety in potentially traumatic environments (Zhao et al., 2020). A supervisor may establish psychological safety for a team amid a crisis by committing to transparency in information-sharing, attending to the well-being of staff members, and establishing a culture where help-seeking behaviors are normalized (Lateef, 2020). Additionally, given that a core component of trauma-informed supervision is the establishment of physical and psychological safety (Berger & Quiros, 2014; Fallot, 2011), examining the connections between supervisor emotional maturity, educators' sense of psychological safety, and educators' trauma responses is theoretically sound and may yield important implications for effective supervisory strategies for educators. The interrelationship between these concepts explored in this study is further outlined in Figure 1.

## Methods

This cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted using data collected from a survey administered between August and September of 2020. The survey was intended to measure both primary and secondary trauma exposure responses of U.S.-based educators across the country, as well as factors that may have influenced these responses. Educators were defined as P-20 teachers/faculty, student or academic support staff, and administrators.

### Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Participants were purposefully recruited via

social media and direct emails that contained a link to the electronic survey instrument. Potential participants were encouraged to share the survey with others that may qualify (i.e., U.S. based educators in K-12 or postsecondary settings). A total of 1674 educators and educational leaders responded to the survey; however, for the purposes of this study, only data collected from college student affairs staff who worked at four-year institutions was used (n=285). Table 1 provides further demographic information regarding the sample.

## Variables

Three primary variables were used in the analyses for this study: psychological safety, emotional maturity, and trauma exposure response.

*Psychological Safety*. Psychological safety was measured using a single item asking participants to respond on a scale from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1) to the question, "To what degree would you agree that your place of employment is an emotionally/psychologically safe environment?" Participants were not given further instruction so that they may self-define the terms. While self-report data such as this is often criticized, scholars of survey research stress the importance of cognitive issues, (whether participants understand the question and have knowledge to answer the question) as well as situational factors (such as social desirability related to an answer to a question; Brener et al., 2003). For this question, we believe that participants understood and had knowledge of their own psychological safety within their work environment. Given the broad sample and anonymity of the survey, they were less likely to answer based on social desirability.

*Emotional Maturity Scale*. The emotional maturity scale consisted of 13 items drawn from the work of Gibson (2015). Participants were prompted to think about their immediate supervisor as they responded on a scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). To test the reliability of the scale for sampled participants, we used Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha$=.965), resulting in an alpha level well above acceptable levels (Pallant, 2016).

*Trauma Exposure Response Scale.* The trauma exposure response scale consisted of 19 items drawn from the work of Lipskey and Burke (2007). Participants were prompted to reflect on their thoughts and feelings with regard to their work since March 2020 as they responded on a scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4). To test the reliability of the scale for sampled participants, we used Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha$=.875), resulting in an alpha level well above acceptable levels (Pallant, 2016).

## Data Analysis

This study employs the use of three analytical techniques to explore the proposed research questions. All analyses were completed using SPSS version 27 software. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted to explore measures of frequency and central tendency with regard to psychological safety and supervisor emotional maturity measures. Subsequently, in order to explore relationships between psychological safety, supervisor emotional maturity, and trauma exposure response, we used mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Shrout & Bolger, 2002) and standard multiple regression (Pallant, 2016). Mediation analysis allowed us to explore the direct and indirect effects of supervisor emotional maturity via psychological safety on trauma exposure response in student affairs practitioners. Multiple regression analysis allowed us to test the overall predictive nature of supervisor emotional maturity and psychological safety on trauma exposure response, as well as explore the unique variance contribution for each supervisor emotional maturity item on psychological safety.

## Limitations

While care was taken to consider the multiple dimensions of validity in this study, results should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. First, housing professionals accounted for 40%

of the sample; this is somewhat unsurprising, as these positions are widely acknowledged to make up a large portion of student affairs positions, particularly among new professionals. Nevertheless, ad-hoc t-tests revealed that housing professionals in our sample had statistically significant lower reports of supervisor emotional maturity, lower reports of psychological safety, and higher reports of trauma exposure responses; given that our focus was not on housing professionals specifically, we did not investigate these results further, but future research might specifically investigate housing professionals' experiences at the intersection of traumatization and supervision given these preliminary results.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of this study focuses on a single point in time—in this case, the beginning of the Fall 2020 academic term--limiting the understanding of participant's longitudinal experiences. Additionally, given concerns of survey fatigue, the construct of psychological safety was a one-item self-report measure, limiting the extent to which nuanced understanding of the phenomena could occur. The student affairs professionals in our sample also did not define what was meant by "workplace" in the psychological safety report measure; this may have included an individual office, unit, division, or even their institution at large. Finally, given the demographic homogeneity in our sample, we did not disaggregate our results by social identity groups in our analysis. Further, given the lack of widespread research on student affairs professionals, we cannot compare the makeup of our sample to the general population; thus, we cannot overly interpret the generalizability of our findings.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

As we as researchers engaged in data collection and analysis, our identities and experiences inevitably informed our perspectives. Through this statement, we seek to acknowledge "the unavoidability of bias" (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1989, p. 82) in our work, with a goal of "explicitly linking findings with suggested actions for social transformation" (Stage & Wells, 2014, p. 3). As such, we explicitly claim our own positionality in an effort to transparently define "the boundaries within which the research was produced" (Jafar, 2018, p. 323). Collectively, we both identify as white, cisgender, and as members of the LGBTQ+ community; we also both are current scholars and former student affairs practitioners with firsthand experiences with workplace trauma. As such, we orient our results and discussion toward purposeful action grounded in our belief in the possibility of--and imperative for--change in the student affairs profession.

## Results

Upon completion of descriptive analyses, we found, on average, participants experienced some level of trauma exposure response to either primary or secondary forms of trauma. The most common trauma exposure responses included the experience of anger, fear, hypervigilance, guilt, exhaustion, and sleep disturbances. Complete descriptive analysis can be found in Table 2.

Additionally, we found that over half of participants (55%) indicated they somewhat or strongly disagreed that their workplace was a psychologically safe environment. Emotional maturity items indicated the majority of participants somewhat or strongly agreed their supervisors demonstrated behaviors consistent with this construct. Truthfulness, even-temperedness, and the ability to work with reality were the most highly rated behaviors. The lowest-rated behaviors included the ability to not take things personally, consistency in behavior, and seeing and understanding their supervisees. Complete results from the descriptive analysis can be found in Table 3.

The relationship between perceived supervisor emotional maturity and supervisee trauma exposure response was mediated by supervisee psychological safety, meaning that while supervisor emotional maturity may not directly predict trau-

ma exposure response in employees, it does predict employee psychological safety, which in turn predicts employee trauma exposure response. As Figure 2 illustrates, the unstandardized regression coefficient between supervisor emotional maturity and psychological safety (Path A) was statistically significant, as was the standardized regression coefficient between psychological safety and trauma exposure response (Path B). There was no statistically significant direct effect between supervisor emotional maturity and trauma exposure response (Path C); however, Shrout & Bolger (2002) and Hayes (2018) argue that this is acceptable given the indirect effect of M between X and Y should be measured by multiplying coefficients from Paths A and B. Grounded in this argument, the unstandardized indirect effect was (.395)(-.208) =- .082. We tested the significance of this indirect effect using the Sobel test, t=-7.312, SE=.011, p<.00. Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant.

Finally, standard linear regression was used to assess the ability of a staff member's perception of supervisor emotional maturity to predict supervisee psychological safety. Preliminary analyses were conducted to check assumptions regarding normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. Staff members' perceptions of supervisor emotional maturity was found to be a significant predictor of their psychological safety, explaining 37% of the variance, $F(13)=11.22$, $p<.00$. Further exploration of the predictive model for psychological safety revealed a staff member's perception that their supervisor was consistent in their behaviors and responses made the largest unique contribution to the model ($\beta$=.232, $p$=.02). Further details for each item can be found in Table 4.

## Discussion

In this study, we sought to explore the degree to which U.S. college student affairs practitioners felt psychologically safe in their workplace, as well as the degree to which these individuals perceived their supervisor as emotionally mature. We also sought to explore the relationship among psychological safety, supervisor emotional maturity, and trauma exposure response during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Findings indicated a majority (55%) of sampled student affairs practitioners disagreed with the notion that their workplace was a psychologically safe environment. Additionally, sampled practitioners indicated mixed perceptions of supervisor emotional maturity, with mean values for truthfulness, even-temperedness, and the ability to work with reality being highest, while not taking things personally, consistency in behaviors, and ability to see and understand their staff had the lowest mean values. Finally, supervisor emotional maturity, mediated by staff sense of psychological safety, was found to be a significant predictor of student affairs practitioners' trauma exposure response, with the perception that the supervisor's ability to be consistent in their behaviors and responses as the single largest predictor of psychological safety.

In light of these findings, leaders in student affairs must concern themselves with increasing psychological safety for their staff members. Delizonna (2017) makes a direct link between psychological safety and high-performing teams, noting that a sense of safety leads to trust, curiosity, confidence, and resilience. As U.S. higher education continues to grapple with challenges in the post-COVID era, including the Great Resignation (BusinessWire, 2022), these qualities will be essential to sustaining the profession's ability to meet the needs of 21st century college students. However, we also underscore that team productivity should not be the only incentive to addressing psychological safety. As a profession that promotes equity, community, and professional wellness (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), creating psychologically safe work environments should be an ethical imperative, both for student affairs supervisors themselves as well as for those who train and hire them.

Additionally, situating this study within current literature highlighting the importance of

psychological safety as an essential component of trauma-informed environments (Reeves et al., 2010) and the impact of supervision on student affairs practitioners' job satisfaction and well-being (Codding, 2019; Gunzberger, 2017; Lynch & Glass, 2020; Mullen et al., 2018; Thomas, 2018; Tull, 2006), these findings provide significant insight into the mechanisms of how this relationship occurs. To date, scholarship exploring student affairs supervision has not explicitly explored the role of psychological safety nor supervisor emotional maturity. The findings of this study provide strong evidence that to build psychological safety within the student affairs work environment, and more attention should be given to the ways in which supervisors demonstrate emotional maturity. This may include efforts to account for emotional maturity in search processes for student affairs supervisory positions, as well as efforts to increase emotional maturity for those currently in student affairs supervisory positions.

**Practical Implications**

Staff and supervisors continue to deal with trauma, retraumatization, and the added impact of high staff turnover, austerity measures, and limited resources for mental health support. As these issues continue to evolve, there are a number of implications from our findings that may inform the practice of student affairs supervisors and leaders. First, given the finding that a majority of sampled practitioners indicated they did not feel psychologically safe at work, it may follow that they feel unable to give honest feedback, collaborate synergistically, and experiment with innovative ideas (Delizonna, 2017; Newman et al., 2017). This may have negative implications for the effectiveness of their work with students. It is the responsibility of supervisors to proactively cultivate psychologically safe workplace environments (Berger & Quiros, 2014; Callender & Lenz, 2018; Davis et al., 1989). This can include incorporation of synergistic supervision techniques that promote two-way communication and joint effort

between supervisor and supervisee (Shupp & Arminio, 2012) and feminist supervisory practices that take identity and power into account (Gilbert & Burden, 2022). Within the context of promoting trauma-informed supervisory relationships, this may include regular proactive check-ins with supervisees with explicit agenda items focused on understanding supervisee perspectives and experiences within the job, as well as offering tools and resources tailored to the needs of the individual supervisee (Gilbert, 2022a; Gilbert, 2022b).

Additionally, for our sample, supervisor emotional maturity was a significant predictor of supervisee psychological safety, and, in turn, supervisee trauma exposure response. This adds to the growing literature regarding the importance of effective supervision in the student affairs profession (Brown et al., 2019; Burden et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019); however, practitioners in student affairs are often promoted into supervisory positions with little to no training (Calhoun & Nasser, 2013; Shupp & Arminio, 2012). Our findings lend support to the necessity of supervisory training and ongoing professional development for student affairs staff; specifically, training designed to cultivate emotional maturity could be beneficial for improving the psychological safety of staff members. While higher education preparation programs have a role to play in expanding curricula to explicitly focus on supervision, many student affairs practitioners do not become supervisors until later in their careers. With this in mind, student affairs divisions and national organizations (both student affairs professional associations in general as well as functional area-specific associations) must go further in offering institutes, in-service trainings, and other professional development (both at and in addition to annual conferences) to support this transition. These trainings may be offered based on career stage, with new supervisors engaging in foundational explorations and case-based learning, while seasoned supervisors may engage in more advanced training, such as learning strategies for incorporating Appreciative

Inquiry (AI) (Glanz & Heimann, 2019). Emotional maturity may also be a useful construct to assess readiness for a supervisory role. Specifically, 360 evaluations (Beehr et al., 2001) may be a useful tool in assessing emotional maturity for hiring and promotion. Equally important, building in mechanisms to assess emotional maturity and other soft skills within the hiring process can help set up supervisors up for success, as well as their staff, in roles that necessitate heavy supervisory support.

Finally, a core component of emotional maturity is the ability to be consistent in one's responses and behaviors to external stressors. From a trauma-informed perspective, predictability allows supervisees to feel safe and regulate their own behaviors and responses in accordance with their experience of their supervisor (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). For example, if a supervisee finds that they can never predict how their supervisor is going to react to a given stressor or situation, they may experience increased stress and decreased psychological safety. To address this, supervisors may seek regular--and, when possible, anonymous--feedback from their supervisees to gauge perceptions of their consistency and identify areas for improvement.

**Implications for Future Scholarship**

Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, longitudinal exploration of the role of psychological safety and supervisor emotional maturity as a predictor of trauma exposure response is warranted. Additionally, this relationship may also be explored outside of the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, psychological safety was operationalized as a one-item construct in this study. An expanded measurement of psychological safety may yield more nuanced results when understanding the relationship among elements of supervisor emotional maturity and trauma exposure response.

Additionally, given the reality of trauma's disproportionate impact across social identity categories (Barlow, 2018; Watson et al., 2016; Yang

& Dinh, 2018), scholars must further explore experiences of psychological safety and trauma responses amongst minoritized groups of student affairs staff. Finally, further research assessing the effectiveness of specific supervisory practices on supervisee well-being is crucial for developing insight into practices that can promote retention and longevity in the field of student affairs.

## Conclusion

As COVID-19 upended U.S. higher education, student affairs professionals were forced to deal with the chronic primary and secondary traumas resulting from navigating their own health and safety, as well as the needs of their students. This study sought to understand the role of supervision and psychological safety as a means for mitigating trauma responses in student affairs practitioners in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Psychological safety is a foundational element to trauma-informed work environments (Delizonna, 2017; Newman et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2020), yet achieving psychological safety can be a nebulous endeavor. This study also sought to explore one construct that may influence the psychological safety of college student affairs practitioners within the workplace: supervisor emotional maturity. Through analysis of the link between supervisor emotional maturity, psychological safety, and trauma exposure response for a sample of student affairs practitioners, this study provides evidence that supervisor emotional maturity impacts supervisee trauma exposure responses through the mediating effect of psychological safety. As U.S. higher education emerges into the post-COVID era, student affairs leaders must give greater attention to building a sense of psychological safety in staff members, as well as specifically equipping supervisors to foster psychological safety within their teams. In doing so, student affairs divisions and higher education institutions at-large may be better able to actualize their espoused values (ACPA & NASPA, 2015) and promote a more just

and equitable workplace and world for their students and for their colleagues.

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Figure 1.

*Hypothesized Relationship of Supervisee Psychological Safety as a Mediator between Supervisor*

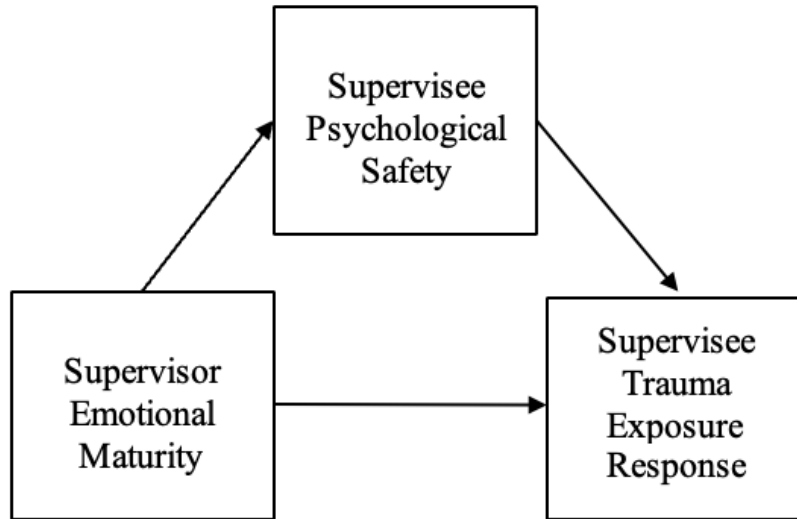*Emotional Maturity and Supervisee Trauma Exposure Response*

Table 1.

*Description of Sample by Frequency & Percentage*

| Functional Area | N | % | Racial Identity | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Housing & Residence Life | 131 | 46.8 | White | 212 | 79.1 |
| Campus Activities | 28 | 10 | African American or Black | 20 | 7.5 |
| Student Conduct | 19 | 6.8 | Multiracial | 14 | 5.2 |
| Career Services | 12 | 4.3 | Hispanic or Latino/a | 12 | 4.5 |
| Academic Advising | 12 | 4.3 | Asian or Asian American | 6 | 2.2 |
| Wellness Programs | 6 | 2.1 | Native American | 2 | 0.7 |
| Fraternity & Sorority Life | 6 | 2.1 | Native Hawiian or Pacific Islander | 2 | 0.7 |
| Case Management | 6 | 2.1 | | | |
| Orientation | 5 | 1.8 | | | |
| Multicultural Student Services | 5 | 1.8 | Gender Identity | | |
| LGBTQIA+ Student Services | 5 | 1.8 | Man | 55 | 20.4 |
| International Student Services | 5 | 1.8 | Woman | 200 | 74.1 |
| Graduate Student Services | 5 | 1.8 | Trans* | 2 | 0.7 |
| Learning Assistance Services | 4 | 1.4 | Non-Binary | 12 | 4.4 |
| College Unions | 4 | 1.4 | | | |
| Civic Learning & Engagement | 4 | 1.4 | Sexual Orientation | | |
| Title IX/Sexual Violence Support | 3 | 1.1 | Straight | 179 | 67.3 |
| Financial Aid | 3 | 1.1 | Gay or Lesbian | 27 | 10.2 |
| Counseling Services | 3 | 1.1 | Bisexual | 29 | 10.9 |
| Service Learning | 3 | 1.1 | I prefer to self-identify | 2 | 0.8 |
| Admissions | 3 | 1.1 | Asexual | 4 | 1.5 |
| Disability Support Services | 2 | 0.7 | Queer | 25 | 9.4 |
| TRiO/Educational Opportunity | 1 | 0.4 | | | |
| Student Affairs Assessment | 1 | 0.4 | Years of Experience | | |
| Spiritual Life/Campus Ministry | 1 | 0.4 | 0-5 Years | 100 | 37.2 |
| Recreational Sports | 1 | 0.4 | 6-10 Years | 78 | 29.0 |
| Commuter Student Services | 1 | 0.4 | 11-15 Years | 48 | 17.8 |
| Alumni Programs | 1 | 0.4 | 16-20 Years | 26 | 9.7 |
| | | | 21+ Years | 17 | 6.3 |

Table 2.

*Descriptive Statistics for Trauma Exposure Response Items*

|  | M | Range | Min | Max | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I have experienced fear with regard to some aspects of my job. | 3.54 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.62 |
| I have experienced guilt with regard to some aspect of my job. | 3.33 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.84 |
| I have experienced anger with some aspects of my job. | 3.61 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.70 |
| I find myself feeling hopeless. | 3.11 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.85 |
| I find myself waiting for the other shoe to drop. | 3.51 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.72 |
| I find myself being snippy or short tempered with others. | 2.98 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.88 |
| I find that I am easily startled. | 2.47 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.91 |
| I find myself over-analyzing situations and believe them to be worse than they are. | 2.99 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.86 |
| I have had trouble falling or staying asleep. | 3.23 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.94 |
| I am less interested in doing things that once brought me joy. | 2.94 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.90 |
| I am constantly exhausted. | 3.56 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.66 |
| I find myself trying to avoid thinking about the upcoming school year. | 3.15 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.93 |
| I have been feeling emotionally numb or difficulty feeling empathy for others. | 2.80 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.93 |
| I have been using alcohol or other drugs more than I usually do. | 1.92 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 1.08 |
| Sometimes it feels like I am watching myself go through the motions of daily life, almost like an out of body experience. | 2.68 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.94 |
| At work, if I don't do it, it either won't get done or won't be done right. | 3.18 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.87 |
| I find it hard to think creatively or engage in new projects or tasks. | 3.03 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.84 |
| I find myself quickly jumping to conclusions. | 2.77 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.77 |
| I am constantly telling myself, "it could be worse." | 3.01 | 3.00 | 1 | 4 | 0.88 |
| **Trauma Response Average** | 3.02 | 2.79 | 1.16 | 3.95 | 0.48 |

*Note: Forced opinion scale, 1=Strongly Disagree; 4=Strongly Agree*

Table 3.

*Descriptive Statistics for Emotional Maturity & Psychological Safety Items*

| Emotional Maturity Items | STD | SWD | NAD | SWA | STA | Mean* | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| They set realistic expectations. | 12% | 16% | 9% | 25% | 38% | 3.52 | 1.36 |
| They work with reality rather than fighting it. | 12% | 13% | 10% | 34% | 31% | 3.60 | 1.35 |
| They can feel and think at the same time. | 13% | 15% | 12% | 34% | 26% | 3.43 | 1.37 |
| They are consistent in their behaviors and responses. | 15% | 18% | 10% | 34% | 24% | 3.34 | 1.40 |
| They don't take things personally. | 15% | 18% | 14% | 32% | 21% | 3.25 | 1.37 |
| They respect my boundaries. | 13% | 16% | 12% | 29% | 31% | 3.47 | 1.41 |
| They are flexible and willing to compromise. | 11% | 14% | 12% | 36% | 28% | 3.56 | 1.32 |
| They are even-tempered. | 11% | 11% | 12% | 36% | 31% | 3.63 | 1.32 |
| They apologize when they make a mistake. | 15% | 14% | 12% | 27% | 32% | 3.47 | 1.45 |
| They see and understand me. | 20% | 10% | 11% | 29% | 30% | 3.37 | 1.50 |
| They are reflective. | 13% | 16% | 11% | 34% | 27% | 3.46 | 1.37 |
| I enjoy being around them. | 12% | 12% | 13% | 26% | 37% | 3.63 | 1.39 |
| They are truthful. | 9% | 13% | 14% | 28% | 35% | 3.71 | 1.31 |
| Emotional Maturity Scale | | | | | | 3.47 | 1.18 |
| **Psychological Safety Item** | | | | | | **Mean**** | **SD** |
| To what degree would you agree that your place of employment is an emotionally/psychologically safe environment? | 27% | 28% | - | 40% | 5% | 2.24 | 0.90 |

*Note: STD (Strongly Disagree), SWD (Somewhat Disagree), NAD (Neither Agree nor Disagree), SWA (Somewhat*

*Agree), STA (Strongly Agree)*

Figure 2.

*Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for the Relationship Between Supervisor Emotional Maturity and*

*Supervisee Trauma Exposure Response as Mediated by Supervisee Psychological Safety*



*p< .00
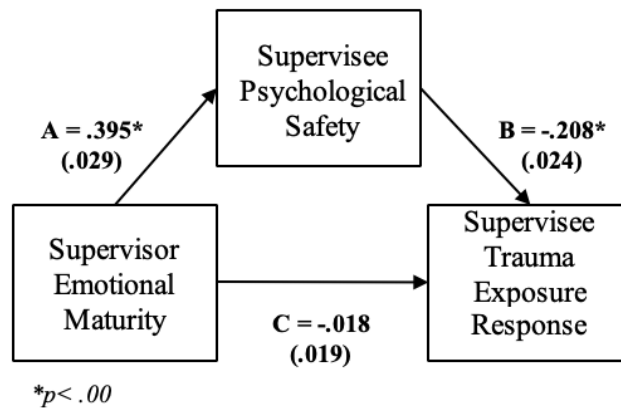
·*Multiple Regression Analysis Results for Psychological Safety by Supervisor Emotional Maturity Items*

| | | | | 95% CI for $\beta$ | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Item | $\beta$ | $t$ | $p$ | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| They set realistic expectations. | .155 | 1.64 | .10 | -.020 | .226 |
| They work with reality rather than fighting it. | .022 | .240 | .81 | -.106 | .136 |
| They can feel and think at the same time. | -.144 | -1.53 | .13 | -.218 | .027 |
| They are consistent in their behaviors and responses. | .232 | 2.27 | .02 | .020 | .280 |
| They don't take things personally. | -.073 | -.919 | .36 | -.152 | .055 |
| They respect my boundaries. | .101 | 1.04 | .30 | -.058 | .188 |
| They are flexible and willing to compromise. | -.148 | -1.53 | .13 | -.232 | .029 |
| They are even-tempered. | .106 | 1.25 | .21 | -.042 | .187 |
| They apologize when they make a mistake. | .025 | .252 | .80 | -.105 | .135 |
| They see and understand me. | .169 | 1.67 | .10 | -.018 | .222 |
| They are reflective. | .161 | 1.68 | .09 | -.018 | .231 |
| I enjoy being around them. | -.015 | -.142 | .89 | -.149 | .129 |
| They are truthful. | .070 | .772 | .44 | -.075 | .173 |