

PATHWAYS TOWARD QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

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Qualitative research has currently become prominent in various fields, including that of counseling psychology. In recent years, qualitative research training has been offered in some counseling psychology graduate programs in Thailand and some existing studies have suggested that there is a link between qualitative research training offered and the number of qualitative research theses conducted. However, there is a paucity of research that specifically investigates counseling psychology graduates' motivations of undertaking qualitative research, as such, it is not yet clear what actually influences the choice of undertaking a qualitative research thesis. Thus, one of the aim of this study was to address such knowledge gap. Five graduates of counseling psychology who completed a qualitative research thesis took part in semi-structured interviews and the interview transcripts were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Two superordinate themes in relation to motivations of undertaking qualitative research were identified. The first superordinate theme, 'The influence of past research training environment', demonstrated how participants' previous research training background played a significant part in shaping their prior attitudes toward qualitative research. The second superordinate theme, 'The significant role of qualitative research training', detailed how qualitative research training served as a catalyst for the route toward qualitative thesis research. The results highlighted the need for qualitative research training to be a core element in research training in counseling psychology, not only for enhancing students' interest and competence in qualitative research, but also for promoting methodological diversity and advancing psychological knowledge.

Keywords: Qualitative research experiences; qualitative research thesis; counseling psychology graduates; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the field of counseling psychology has steadily moved toward greater methodological diversity (Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2002). In reviews of the development of qualitative research methods in counseling psychology (Levitt, 2015) and in psychology (Riley et al., 2019), it was

indicated that, after a lengthy quantitative research dominance in the field, qualitative research has now become prominent within the fields, as evidenced by more training and funding on qualitative research as well as the increasing number of theses and publications undertaken using qualitative methodologies. A similar trend can also be seen within counseling psychology in Thailand, where qualitative approaches have historically been less valued in favor of quantitative approaches, but have gradually grown in popularity. In recent years, some counseling psychology graduate programs in Thailand have begun to offer a qualitative research course as an elective subject, and a few more counseling students have started to use qualitative methodologies in their thesis.

Existing studies suggested a parallel between required training in qualitative research and the number of qualitative theses. Ponterotto (2005) surveyed 60 doctoral counseling psychology programs in North America and identified that there were qualitative research courses available in all the responding programs. However, only 6% of these programs listed qualitative courses as required, and qualitative doctoral theses were produced twice as often by students in programs requiring a qualitative course (29.7%) as compared to those in programs that did not require such a course (13.9%). More recently, Rubin et al. (2018) investigated the current trends of qualitative research approaches in 76 US psychology graduate programs and found that, over the past five years, only 13% of programs required a qualitative course and merely 14.7% of students used qualitative approaches in their theses.

Gelso et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of the research training environment and identified that equipping students with the full range of research methodologies is one of the key elements for their attitudes toward research, their perceived competence for undertaking research, and their subsequent research productivity. Similarly, Jorgensen and Duncan (2015) investigated research identity development of master's-level counselors and identified the research training environment as fundamental to develop a research identity. They suggested three stages of research identity: stagnation (low), negotiation (moderate), and stabilization (high). The stagnation level of research is a result of internal factors such as confusion, disinterest, and avoidance, as well as external factors such as limited research training in undergraduate programs, having a non-psychology background, and negative messages about research from others. In contrast, the moderate and high levels of research identity (negotiation and stabilization) are influenced by internal factors, such as a recognition of the usefulness of research and its relevance to counseling practice, and external factors such as being taught alternative research methodologies, including qualitative research. Although there is some evidence suggesting a link between students' exposure to qualitative research training and their use of such methodologies in their research thesis, it is still not clear how qualitative research training leads to the choice of undertaking a qualitative thesis.

One of the useful frameworks that can be used to understand an individual's choice of action is the multicomponent model of attitude (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; 2007). This model explains the attitude-behavior relationship and attitude is defined as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993: 1) and is viewed to have three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive component of attitudes refers to thoughts, beliefs, and attributes regarding an object (in this case 'qualitative research'). The affective component of attitudes refers to feelings and emotions toward qualitative research, and the behavioral component of attitudes refers to previous experiences and behaviors associated with qualitative research. These components have reciprocal effects; when a person has positive beliefs, they usually have positive affect and positively directed behaviors. In addition to this model, the theory of planned behavior, an extended version of the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991), asserts that the most important direct determinant of action is intention, which is determined by three factors: 1) attitude toward performing the behavior, which refers to an individual's beliefs about the outcomes of performing the behavior; 2) subjective norms, which refers to an individual's beliefs about whether significant others approve or disapprove of performing the behavior; and 3) perceived behavioral control, which refers to an individual's beliefs about whether they possess the necessary resources to perform the behavior.

While there is an existing body of research studying the thesis process and experience, much of such research has explored this issue broadly and not specifically relating to the qualitative research thesis, and also has mainly focused on the perspectives of doctoral students (e.g., Flynn et al., 2012; Knox et al., 2011). In addition, among existing studies that directly explored qualitative research experience, the main focus has been on the perspectives of students who completed a qualitative research coursework (Reisetter et al., 2004; Roberts and Castell, 2016), rather than a qualitative research. Additionally, given that qualitative research training has been recently included in some counseling psychology graduate programs in Thailand, a study on this area is topical. This paper is part of broader research aimed at understanding the qualitative research motivations and experience of master's-level graduates of counseling psychology. Other findings related to their experiences of conducting a qualitative research were published elsewhere (Srichannil, 2020). The aim

of this paper was to deepen the knowledge base by qualitatively exploring what influences counseling psychology graduates' choice of undertaking a qualitative research. The results could lead to an identification of the elements facilitating the use of qualitative research approaches, thereby further promoting methodological diversity and advancing knowledge within counseling psychology.

2. METHODS

Design

The study used a retrospective qualitative design involving five semi-structured in-depth interviews, with the data analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009). IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research, with the aim of obtaining insight into how individuals understand and make sense of their personal and social world (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is particularly suitable for the aim of this study. The phenomenological and hermeneutic focuses of IPA allow two levels of interpretation, enabling the capturing of both the insiders' perspectives and making sense of the implicit meanings contained in the data. Its idiographic focus enhances producing detailed knowledge about the topic under investigation.

In line with the guidelines for IPA research (Smith et al., 2009), the semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for generating detailed accounts of participants' experiences. The interview questions were in an open and exploratory form, aiming to allow the participants to tell their story in their own words and to feel free to open avenues they deemed important. The study received ethical approval from the university's institutional review board (Number Hu 002/2561). With the written and verbal permission from all the participants, the interviews were digitally recorded, originally conducted in Thai and lasted approximately 90 minutes (ranged from 70 to 120 minutes).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify the potential participants. The inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) master's-level graduates of counseling psychology; 2) completed at least one qualitative research course during their master study; 3) conducted a qualitative thesis as part of their master degree; 4) were able to articulate their experiences on the research phenomenon; and 5) were not my students. The participants were identified through my professional contacts and snowballing. Six potential participants were invited to participate in the study and all agreed to take part in the study. However, one participant dropped out before attending due to time constraints.

The five participants who met the inclusion criteria and participated in the study were a cohort from a counseling psychology program. They were female, native Thai speakers, with an age range of 27-38 years (see Table 1). They provided a homogenous sample required in an IPA study. Also, the small sample size is in agreement with the idiographic underpinnings of IPA, allowing for an in-depth analysis of data (Smith et al., 2009). To preserve participant anonymity, all were allocated pseudonyms: Jane, Lin, Ploy, Rose, and Ying.

Table 1: Participants' Basic Information

Participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Undergraduate background	Prior familiarity with qualitative research
Jane	F	29	Non-psychology	Yes
Lin	F	38	Psychology	Yes
Ploy	F	30	Psychology	No
Rose	F	27	Psychology	No
Ying	F	27	Psychology	No

Data analysis

The analysis followed the procedures of IPA described by Smith et al. (2009). In keeping with the idiographic commitment of IPA, the analytic process started with an analysis of each single case in turn prior to moving to cross-case analysis to identify any commonalities and discrepancies. Consistent with the phenomenological focus of IPA, I attempted to be aware of my own assumptions in order to be able to ground my analysis as closely as possible to the data. While working on each transcript, I treated each participant's transcript individually and on its own terms by bracketing ideas from prior transcripts when working on another.

The analysis involved familiarization with the data through reading and rereading the transcripts as well as noting key ideas. These notes were then transformed into concise phrases or themes to reflect the core of each participant's experiences. All identified themes were subsequently grouped under relevant superordinate themes and sub-themes. During this process, some themes were maintained, discarded, or renamed. This resulted in a table of themes with supporting extracts for each participant and common themes across all cases were subsequently identified. The analysis of this study closely adhered to the quality criteria of IPA proposed by Smith (2011). In this case, each following theme will be supported with extracts from all participants and will be accompanied with both descriptive and interpretative analyses, honoring the phenomenological and hermeneutic underpinnings of IPA. The analysis also offers a detailed examination of convergence and divergence among the participants' accounts. The themes presented here were the result of a double hermeneutic; they were co-constructed, and time and context-specific, thereby representing only one of possible constructions of the phenomenon studied. All the extracts presented in this paper were translated from Thai into English by the author. In the process of translation, attempts were made to maintain the accuracy of translation and the equivalence of meaning.

In presenting the extracts, for ease of reading, small hesitations, repeated words and sounds and utterances such as 'um' have mostly been omitted unless relevant to interpretation. In addition, material omitted is indicated by three dots in parentheses, where the text was not directly relevant to the themes under discussion or in places of repetitions. Laughs and long pauses, etc., are maintained in parentheses, if they were considered as adding interpretative value to the spoken words. To ensure anonymity of participants, all identifiable names and details are also replaced with a description in parentheses.

3. RESULTS

This paper focuses on the key elements that influenced counseling psychology graduates' choice of undertaking a qualitative research. The first superordinate theme, 'the influence of past research training environment', consists of two interrelated sub-themes, 'interest or indifference' and 'by choice or by chance'. The second superordinate theme, 'the significant role of qualitative research training', encompasses two sub-themes, 'qualitative research course as fundamental' and 'experiential learning as significant'.

The influence of past research training environment

This superordinate theme illustrates the impact of participants' previous research training background on their attitudes and paths toward qualitative research training.

Interest or indifference

A core narrative across participants' accounts points to the influential role of the past research training environment in shaping their attitudes and their stances toward qualitative research. In particular, messages about qualitative research from academic staff appeared to play a significant role in determining how much participants recognized the value of qualitative research. This is perfectly captured by Ying, who attributed her indifference to qualitative research to negative messages about qualitative research received from academic staff members in her psychology department at undergraduate and postgraduate levels:

"In my undergraduate study, there was no focus on qualitative research. The main and only focus was on quantitative approaches. It seems that academic staff at my department believed that qualitative research was too difficult for undergraduate students. Psychology programs also did not accept it. So, at that time, I was not interested in it. But later, when I came to study counseling, I began to hear about it, but in a way that it would take so long to complete a qualitative project and you would not graduate on time." (Ying)

Negative descriptions of qualitative research repeatedly appear throughout the above extract. Qualitative research was negatively portrayed as too difficult, unacceptable and long terrain. It is worth noticing that there is a slight shift of the tone in this extract, from negative to more positive and back again to negative. When Ying said that she began to hear about qualitative research during her master's study, she seemed to imply that, although qualitative research had gained some acceptance, it still remained to be negatively perceived in counseling psychology. Due to such prolonged negative messages about qualitative research, it is not surprising that Ying described a clear link between her perceived negativity of qualitative research and her previous indifference in it. A similar sense of indifference was indicated by Rose:

"If I had known that it was elective, I would not have taken it. Because I did not know qualitative research that much. I did not have any research topic. I was leaning more toward quantitative research actually, because I had always known about it. Although I felt some goose bumps with statistics, I had always known more about them." (Rose)

It is apparent here that, if Rose had known that the qualitative research course was not compulsory, she would not have enrolled in it. An indifference to qualitative research and a tendency to use quantitative methods despite the dislike of statistics indicate the dominant quantitative culture in the psychology research training. Ploy also echoed this impact of quantitative dominance on her lack of prior interest in qualitative research: *“At that time (undergraduate time) there was little training on qualitative research. I did not quite understand how to do it (qualitative research) so I did not bother about it.”* Lin described the same idea in a different way:

“I was interested in doing qualitative research since my last degree, but I was not sure that I would do it. Because, at that time, which was quite a long time ago, it seemed that qualitative research was even more unacceptable than today, most lecturers only taught quantitative research approaches. They did not seem to accept qualitative research. So, I did not do it and chose to do quantitative instead.”
(Lin)

Lin’s assertion captures the profound influence of the research training environment, in the sense that no faculty support for qualitative training prohibited her from using her own methodological preference. Again, Lin’s comparative statement *“qualitative research was even more unacceptable than today”* suggests her perceived status of qualitative research as greater yet remaining less privileged.

In contrast to other participants, Jane appeared to have a positive attitude toward qualitative research: *“Reading qualitative research thesis, I felt like watching a movie. I personally liked hearing people’s stories. I found them more enjoyable than reading numbers.”* Although, in this extract, Jane did not directly link this attitude to her prior research training, she described in the interview her previous experience of undertaking *“a kind of case study research”*. This may be interpreted as indicating that Jane’s prior qualitative research experience may have some influence on her enthusiasm for qualitative research.

The above accounts illustrate how the research training environment influenced their decisions. Applying the concept of research identity development (Jorgensen and Duncan 2015), it can be explained that academic members’ attitudes toward qualitative research (external factor) have the power to affect students’ attitudes and interests in qualitative research (internal factor) and, subsequently, as will be presented in the next theme, their (in)active decision on engaging in qualitative research learning.

By choice or by chance

It should be noted that the qualitative research coursework taken by the participants was elective. As will be seen in the next theme, although all participants considered such course as essential for their pathways toward a qualitative research, not every participant took up the qualitative course deliberately. Below, I present participants’ accounts in a sequential manner, moving from Lin and Jane who enrolled in the course by choice to Ploy, Ying and Rose who embarked on the course by chance.

“I had been interested in qualitative research for a long time. And when I came to study here, I found that there was some support here for qualitative research. I already had an experience with quantitative, so I wanted to have another experience, I did not want to do the same.” (Lin)

Given that Lin had a long interest in qualitative research, it is thus unsurprising that she eagerly took the opportunity when it came. A reason underlying this action appears to be Lin’s desire to explore and do something different, as she stated that *“I was a curious person. When I had a chance to know what I already wanted to know, I would not leave that chance.* This intention seems to occur as a combined result of her own interest in qualitative research and perceived learning support for it. Jane, who possessed a prior positive attitude toward qualitative research, suggested a similar idea:

“When I just started my study, I wanted to know what people here were studying. (...) so I looked for their thesis and then found I had never seen something like that before, like (specific examples of research topics). And this made me feel like ‘you can do it like this?’ (laughs). Since then, I told myself that I would take up a course in qualitative research and I would do qualitative research.” (Jane)

Jane’s intentional choice of partaking in a coursework in qualitative research methods is evident here. A sense of surprise at ‘strange’ qualitative topics suggests Jane’s initial perception of qualitative research as unusual in a way that triggered her further interest in qualitative research. Perhaps Jane’s little training in qualitative research together with her non-psychology background caused such surprise. Adopting the multicomponent model of attitude (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; 2007), it perhaps can be explained that, for Jane, qualitative research was attractive (cognition), it was enjoyable for her (affect) and she also had some previous experience with what she called *“a kind of case study research”* (behavior). All of these three positive components contributed to Jane’s strong positive attitude toward qualitative research and such positive attitude then influenced her behavioral intention to learn and conduct qualitative research. This similar relationship is also expressed by other three participants, but in different ways:

"I did not previously know it (qualitative research) much. I did not quite understand how to do it. But, in my master's study, there was a course in qualitative research. I thought it was compulsory because everyone in my cohort enrolled in it, so I did." (Ploy)

"I did not know if it (a qualitative research course) was either a core or elective subject. I saw that others enrolled in the course, and so did I. It was not a difficult decision at all, just follow the crowd, and at that time I thought it was good to know several things." (Ying)

These two extracts clearly indicate the role of social influence on the participants' choice of enrolling in a qualitative research course, suggesting the choice was not from the participants' own active decision. This unintentional choice may reflect the collectivism of Thai culture. As indicated by Gunawan (2016), Thai students tend to prioritize group cohesiveness, thereby conforming to the needs of a group and behaving in accordance to group norms. Also, there seems to be a link between an unintentional choice of a qualitative research course and a sense of indifference toward qualitative research, as clearly expressed by Rose:

"I did not have any passion about qualitative research. It was not the subject in my list at all. (...) It just happened that there was a person in our cohort who wanted to take up this course and asked us to do so. So, we all just followed her. Following her and taking up the course was a good thing. We then just realized on the first day of the course that it was just elective. And we were saying something like 'didn't we need to take it? and why did we take it?'" (Rose)

Rose's sense of amusement at her naïve participation in an elective course in qualitative methods suggests the intensity of her unintentionality and also her satisfaction with that unintentionality (*"taking up the course was a good thing"*). Why did participants previously possess an indifferent stance toward qualitative research? Drawing on the multicomponent model of attitude, I deduce that these three participants did not have prior experience with qualitative research (behavior), so they did not find qualitative research useful or attractive (cognition) and, thus, they did not have particular affection for it (affect). This is an illustration of how participants' research training background as well as their social conformity (the external) influences their behavioral decision-making (the internal).

The significant role of qualitative research training

This second superordinate theme demonstrates how an exposure to a coursework in qualitative research methods influences participants' choice of a qualitative research.

Qualitative research course as fundamental

Talking about their qualitative research experiences, participants constantly made references to a qualitative research course in which they all once enrolled. Having a chance to be trained in qualitative research methods was found to be the key factor for all participants' pathway toward a qualitative research thesis. This is concisely captured by Ploy: *"Without the course, I would not have done it because I felt that I did not quite understand how to do it."* The significance of a qualitative research course was also salient to other participants. Rose described the link between her involvement in a qualitative course and her choice of a qualitative research:

"Without the (qualitative research) course, I would not have done qualitative research because at that time I had no idea what topic I wanted to do for my thesis. I was totally blank. (...) Without the course, I may have already chosen to do quantitative." (Rose)

Rose believed that, if she did not take up the qualitative course, she would have embarked on quantitative research, an approach that she *"had always known about"*. The word 'blank' she used, implies the unknown state, or perhaps anything goes. It seems that a course in qualitative methods, or more precisely, the experiential component of the course (as will be presented in the next theme) helped her fill in that 'blank' by inspiring her a qualitative research idea. A similar attribution can be found in Ying's account. Enrolling in a qualitative research course enabled Ying to find her preferred research direction:

"I always wanted to do this topic (a specific research topic of interest), but no one could tell me which way to go to get an answer. (...) Eventually, one person told me that there were two ways to do this topic, either factor analysis or qualitative research. I kept that suggestion in mind. Okay! I would try the qualitative course, and on that course, this is it! It was qualitative research that I could surely use." (Ying)

Ying expressed her attempt to find the right research path that could take her to a preferred destination. Unlike Rose, Ying had an idea about the topic she wished to pursue yet had no clear idea about how to do it, either quantitatively or qualitatively. In saying that *"on that course, this is it!"* Ying directly linked her choice of qualitative research to the qualitative research course. Taken together, this and other accounts

suggest that a coursework in qualitative methods served as a platform toward a qualitative research for participants who were exposed to qualitative research for the first time.

On the other hand, participants with prior interest in qualitative research seemed to view their engagement in qualitative research training as a springboard that made them more confident and competent with qualitative research. Lin regarded a qualitative research course as “*a path that it helped to know what to do in order to answer (her) research question*”. Similarly, for Jane, the qualitative research course equipped her with greater knowledge and confidence in undertaking a qualitative research: “*I knew much more about qualitative research from that course than I previously knew from my undergraduate study. It made me feel that I was able to do it.*” The significance of a qualitative research course for the path to a qualitative thesis is nicely reflected by Rose, who was prompted to make sense of why students in her cohort also chose to do a qualitative research:

“I think it was because they had studied qualitative research methods. Without that sort of study, we would not have a good grounding, we would know only quantitative methods. When we had that grounding, and then we picked qualitative research up, it was like we had a resource to do that. When I had finished the course, I felt confident that I would definitely do qualitative research, because I had all the resources I needed, I had an instructor who taught qualitative methods, and she could be my research supervisor.” (Rose)

Rose promptly attributed students’ choice of undertaking a qualitative thesis to their exposure to qualitative research training, and she regarded such training as ‘a resource’ that built up a sense of competence to undertake a qualitative research project. Interestingly, there is a shift in Rose’s sense-making from others (the use of ‘we’) to herself (the use of ‘I’), suggesting a parallel between what Rose thought about others and what she thought about herself. It is also worth noticing the change of word form (from ‘a resource’ to ‘all supervisor for a qualitative research’), which potentially suggests that one opportunity (a qualitative research course) led to the next (a qualitative supervisor). Adopting the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), I interpret that participants’ perception of the presence of necessary facilitators to the use of qualitative methods has a significant effect on their choice of undertaking a qualitative thesis.

Experiential learning as significant

Four participants pointed to the experiential component of the qualitative research course as a significant resource that helped them learn the most. Based on the participants’ accounts, such experiential part was concerned with the practical application of the knowledge gained to conduct a small qualitative research project, starting from the process of developing a research topic to writing up of the analysis. Jane’s account below encapsulates its significance:

“There were two main parts in the subject: the lecture and the practice, and I learned much more from the practice. (...) In that subject, what I remembered most clearly is that there was a big piece of group assignment, we were assigned to do a small qualitative research project.” (Jane)

Among many other things in the course, an experiential learning was the most memorable part for Jane, which is suggestive of its paramount importance. A similar sense of significance was suggested by Lin: “*What I remember most clearly from that course was the practical part. It was a group assignment.*” What seems salient to participants was the connection between the experiential learning and the insight into a thesis topic, as Rose articulated:

“In our qualitative research class, we were asked to find a research topic. At that time, I was working at (name of workplace) which involved working with (specific group of people). (...) That area became a topic for the assignment, and I found it worked. So, I talked about this with my instructor and then I stayed with that topic for my thesis. I only hoped it to be a topic for that class, but in fact it also became the topic for my thesis.” (Rose)

This extract from Rose highlights the importance of the hands-on experience on the acquisition of a qualitative thesis topic. A particular point of interest here is the last sentence of the extract, suggesting that the outcome of such experiential learning surpassed expectations. Rose mentioned earlier that she was ‘totally blank’ about her research topic prior to this qualitative research course. As the experiential learning helped fill such blank, it thus makes sense why such learning was particularly regarded as significant. Ying’s following account sheds further light on the role of the experiential learning in facilitating a sense of certainty and commitment to pursue a qualitative research:

“During the second year of my master’s study, I studied qualitative research and I was assigned to think about a research topic. At that time, I was not sure if I would take that topic. I just mentioned that I wanted to study about (a topic area of interest). Other students in the class also proposed their

topics, but my instructor said that my topic was possible, and I felt like oh! it was possible, it was actually possible.” (Ying)

Like other participants, Ying attributed her chosen thesis topic to the experiential task of the course. She portrayed vividly how the course instructor’s approval influenced the choice of her thesis topic. As earlier presented, although Ying had some idea about a research topic, she was uncertain about it. That uncertainty seemed to fade as she gained more confidence in her research idea, as a result of engaging in the experiential learning. In this respect, engaging experientially in a small qualitative research project appears to be a significant path for participants toward a qualitative research thesis.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the findings of this current study are consistent with the existing literature, fostering the notion that the research training environment plays an important role in shaping students’ research attitudes and competence. In particular, the first superordinate theme indicates that no or limited opportunities for studying qualitative research methods existed for the participants prior to their master’s coursework in qualitative research methods. This finding is not surprising, given the sustained dominance of quantitative culture in Thailand. The scarcity of qualitative research courses offered in counseling psychology is also well-documented in the literature (e.g., Okech et al., 2006; Ponterotto, 2005; Povee and Roberts, 2014; Reisetter et al., 2004). The findings also suggest that the research training environment had a significant impact on students’ interest in qualitative research. In line with the literature that points to the impact of contextual factors on students’ research attitudes (Jorgensen and Duncan, 2015; Rubin et al., 2018), my findings suggest that having no training in qualitative research methods as well as absorbing negative messages about qualitative research (e.g., qualitative research as unimportant and unreliable) from academic members were found to be associated with a lack of interest in qualitative research. In contrast, having some familiarity with qualitative research was found to be related with an interest in learning more about and engaging in qualitative research. These findings agree with previous findings that revealed the role of previous research training in shaping students’ attitudes towards qualitative research (Astramovich et al., 2004; Gelso et al., 2013; Reisetter et al., 2004; Povee and Roberts, 2014).

Looking at these findings in more depth, counseling psychology’s historical negative view toward qualitative methods seems to play a central role in reproducing such view in the research training environment, transferring from one counselor educator to many more students over time (McLeod, 2011; Morrow, 2007). Such enduring negative attitudes toward qualitative research then serves as a key barrier for students and academics to engage in qualitative research (Roberts and Castell, 2016), thereby limiting the number of academics with expertise in qualitative research methods and this limitation contributes to the absence of departmental support for qualitative research training (Rubin et al., 2018). Adopting the multicomponent model of attitudes (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; 2007), the findings suggest that participants’ prior positive attitude has an effect on their behavioral intention to learn and conduct qualitative research. Additionally, in alignment with many other studies (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2007; Okech et al., 2006; Ponterotto, 2005; Povee and Roberts, 2014; Rubin et al., 2018), this study reveals that the lack of qualitative research training serves as a significant barrier for counseling students to be adequately trained in qualitative research methods and to embark on a qualitative research project.

The second superordinate theme indicates that participants considered a coursework in qualitative research methods and its experiential component as a catalyst for their qualitative research thesis. There was a strong sense of the necessity of these two elements for enabling the qualitative research path possible, as one participant articulated: *“Without the course, I may have already chosen to do quantitative research”* (Rose). This account corroborates well with Rubin et al.’s (2018) contention that *“training in qualitative inquiry impacts how many and how often graduate students use qualitative methods in their thesis research”* (p. 4). Within the qualitative course, participants found experiential learning as critical for gaining insights into the real-world practice of qualitative research, thereby aiding their acquisition of concrete understanding and practical skills. This finding concurs with the existing studies that underscore the importance of experiential learning as an integral part of qualitative research training (Jorgensen and Duncan, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2007), but my findings also suggest the role of experiential learning in facilitating the participants’ choice of a qualitative research thesis. Notably, the participants indicated that engaging in hands-on learning helped them think through and identify potential qualitative research topics, ultimately setting the path for their qualitative thesis topics. Additionally, the findings substantiate and extend the previous findings of several studies (Ponterotto, 2005; Povee and Roberts, 2014; Rubin et al., 2018) that revealed the association between qualitative courses offered and qualitative thesis produced by offering more specific, concrete, and detailed understanding about

the underlying reasons behind counseling students' choice of undertaking a qualitative thesis, thereby adding new knowledge to the limited literature on this area.

Drawing upon the findings of this present study and Gelso et al.'s (2013) suggestion that "students' research interest, self-efficacy, competence, and productivity will ultimately be most enhanced by teaching and valuing a variety of methodologies" (p. 142), I recommend that a course in qualitative research methods be a required element of counseling psychology graduate program curricula. This recommendation is also resonant with existing literature (Letourneau, 2015; Roberts and Castell, 2016; Wiggins et al., 2016) and with a requirement of qualitative research methods for accredited psychology programs both in the UK (British Psychological Society, 2016) and the US (American Psychological Association, 2015). The inclusion of the requirement is undoubtedly well-timed and significant for broadening students' research knowledge and the skill base of counseling psychology graduates, enhancing their methodological flexibility and ultimately promoting methodological pluralism of the field. When there are more students being trained in qualitative research methods, it is likely that there will be more students who use qualitative methodologies in their thesis research. There will then be more future generations of academics with qualitative research expertise. Expanding students' research repertoire will potentially lead to what Brinkmann (2015) calls a "dream scenario", when "psychologists could ask any relevant research question and use any methodology and technique that was needed in order to adequately address their research question, without much thought as to whether this was a qualitative or a quantitative approach" (p. 170).

In addition, the participants in this study emphasized the benefits of their hands-on experience with a small qualitative research project, enabling them to make a connection between knowledge and practice. Hence, I suggest that qualitative instructors need to carefully plan the hands-on assignment in a way that makes it well-organized and accessible for students and devote a certain amount of time in the class to helping students address the challenges they may face and encouraging students' reflections on their learning from the experiential project.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study utilized IPA to explore the reasons behind counseling psychology graduates' pathways toward qualitative thesis. The use of IPA provided a detailed understanding of these graduates' motivations for pursuing qualitative research, and highlighted the need for qualitative research training to be a core element in research training in counseling psychology, not only for enhancing students' interest and competence in qualitative research, but also for promoting methodological diversity and advancing psychological knowledge. To add additional breadth and depth to these contributions, future research could use focus groups in addition to interviews to seek insights into perceptions of how best to integrate qualitative research training into counseling psychology curriculum. In addition, this study focused on the experiences of graduates of counseling psychology who had already completed their qualitative research thesis. The retrospective nature of this study may have limited the memories of the participants. Therefore, future research may consider exploring the qualitative research motivations from the perspectives of students who are at the beginning stage of their qualitative research project. In addition, this research explored qualitative research experiences from a particular perspective (graduates of counseling psychology) in a particular context (the field of counseling psychology in Thailand), thus, future research may extend the focus of this study by investigating such issue from different perspectives (e.g., qualitative researchers, master's or doctoral students who are at different stages of conducting qualitative research), or in different contexts (e.g., other fields of study). Such further research would help illuminate the findings of current and previous research, thereby providing a fuller picture of those involved in the terrain of qualitative research.

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