COUNSELING GRADUATES' EXPERIENCE OF UNDERTAKING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGUCAL ANALYSIS

ประสบการณ์การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพของบัณฑิตสาขาจิตวิทยาการปรึกษา: การวิเคราะห์เชิงปรากฏการณ์วิทยาแบบตีความ

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Abstract

Qualitative research methodologies have currently been widely used in psychological research. In Thailand, some counseling psychology programs have recently started to offer qualitative research training and more counseling students are using qualitative methodologies in their theses. However, to date there appears to be no research addressing the qualitative research experience of Thai-based counseling graduates. This research was thus set out to fill such gap in the literature, with the aim to identify potential ways to further support students to be successful in the conduct of qualitative research. The study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five master's level counseling graduates who completed a qualitative thesis. This paper presents one salient aspect of the qualitative research experience, namely "Facilitators and barriers in the qualitative research process", consisting of the four following sub-themes: 1) "The late exposure to qualitative research learning", 2) "Qualitative analysis as challenging", 3) "The influential role of qualitative research advisors", and 4) "The relevance of counseling and qualitative research skills". These results are considered in the context of previous literature. Practical implications and suggestions for future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Qualitative research, experience, counseling graduates,
Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

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บทคัดย่อ

ปัจจุบันนี้การวิจัยทางจิตวิทยามีการใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพกันอย่างแพร่หลายมากขึ้น สาขาวิชาจิตวิทยาการปรึกษาในประเทศไทยบางแห่งได้เริ่มมีการจัดการเรียนการสอนเกี่ยวกับการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพและมีนักศึกษาที่ใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพในงานวิทยานิพนธ์เพิ่มมากขึ้น อย่างไรก็ตาม จนถึงปัจจุบันนี้ยังไม่มีงานวิจัยใดที่ทำการศึกษาประสบการณ์การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพของบัณฑิตไทยสาขาจิตวิทยาการปรึกษา งานวิจัยนี้จึงมุ่งเติมเต็มช่องว่างดังกล่าวในวรรณกรรม โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาแนวทางที่จะช่วยส่งเสริมความสำเร็จของนักศึกษาในการทำวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ งานวิจัยนี้ดำเนินการวิจัยโดยใช้การวิเคราะห์เชิงปรากฏการณ์วิทยาแบบตีความ ข้อมูลการวิจัยได้มาจากการสัมภาษณ์กึ่งโครงสร้างกับมหาบัณฑิตสาขาจิตวิทยาการปรึกษาจำนวน 5 คนที่มีประสบการณ์ในการทำวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ บทความวิจัยนี้นำเสนอหนึ่งประเด็นสำคัญ “ปัจจัยสนับสนุนและปัจจัยขัดขวางในกระบวนการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ” ซึ่งเกี่ยวข้องกับประเด็นย่อย 4 ประการ คือ 1) “ความล่าช้าในการเรียนรู้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ” 2) “ความท้าทายในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพ” 3) “บทบาทสำคัญของอาจารย์ที่ปรึกษาการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ” และ 4) ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างทักษะการปรึกษาและทักษะการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ” ผู้วิจัยอภิปรายผลการวิจัยเหล่านี้เชื่อมโยงกับวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้อง พร้อมให้ข้อเสนอแนะสำหรับการนำผลการวิจัยไปใช้และสำหรับทิศทางการวิจัยต่อไปในอนาคต

คำสำคัญ: การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ประสบการณ์ บัณฑิตสาขาจิตวิทยาการปรึกษา การวิเคราะห์เชิงปรากฏการณ์วิทยาแบบตีความ

Introduction

As with psychology, counseling psychology has historically been dominated by quantitative methods for most of its history, as Brinkmann (2015) articulates “within the short history of psychology, we find an even shorter history of qualitative psychology specifically” (p. 162). In a decade content analysis (2001-2010) of published articles regarding teaching and learning trends in counselor education, Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, and Yaites (2014) found that of the 74 research papers, more than half of them (68.92%) used quantitative methods, the remaining papers used qualitative methods (25.68%) and mixed methods (5.40%).

Although qualitative inquiry has been part of psychology and its sub-fields since its establishment as a distinct science in 1879, it was not until around the 1980s that the word “qualitative” began to emerge in psychology journals. Indeed, it has been only since the 1990s that qualitative research has made a significant growth (Gough & Lyons, 2016; Howitt, 2010; Levitt, 2015). Over the past three decades, qualitative research methods have been increasingly popular in psychology, including counseling psychology, especially in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Gough & Lyons, 2016). In the UK, since 2002 qualitative methods have been included in the subject benchmarks of a BPS accredited Psychology degree (BPS, 2016). In addition, the

Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section has become the biggest section of the British Psychological Society (BPS) with more than 800 members (Gibson & Sullivan, 2012; Riley et al., 2019; Wertz, 2014). Similarly, in the US, the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP), formally formed in 2011, regularly arranges events, workshops, meetings, and annual conference, and offers awards for outstanding qualitative work in psychology (Josselson, 2019).

These trends are indicative of "qualitative turn" as Ponterotto (2002, p. 126) anticipated, or of a "tectonic change" that will transform the research culture of the discipline, as O'Neill (2002, p. 190) noted. Despite still being underutilized in some psychology departments, qualitative research methods are steadily growing around the world (Brinkmann, 2015). Many scholars believe that qualitative research is "inevitable" due to its suitability to generate psychological knowledge and its congruence with the value and practice of therapy (e.g., McLeod, 2011; Wertz, 2014). McLeod (2011), for example, indicates that qualitative research has much in common with the practice of counseling psychology: "the activity of doing qualitative research (identifying and clarifying meaning; learning how the meaning of aspects of the social world is constructed) is highly concordant with the activity of doing therapy (making new meaning, gaining insight and understanding, learning how personal meanings have been constructed)" (p.16).

The broader field of counseling psychology has been moving towards a pluralist orientation to research. The field of counseling psychology in Thailand, too, is beginning to catch up with such research trend. Some counseling psychology programs in Thailand have recently started to offer qualitative research training as an elective component and there has been a gradual increase in the number of qualitative research theses. According to my recent review of counseling psychology thesis abstracts from the ThaiLIS database, I found that of the 373 theses, 16.62% (n=62) used qualitative research methods and almost all of these qualitative theses were master's level theses (96.77%, n=60).

Although a number of anecdotal evidences indicate that more counseling students are using qualitative methodologies in their research projects (e.g., Levitt, 2015; Morrow, 2007; McLeod, 2011), empirical research that specifically addresses the experiences of those who use remains limited. Much existing literature on (qualitative) research experiences has paid attention to students' general views towards qualitative research (Povee & Roberts, 2014) students' perceptions of qualitative research after completing a course in qualitative methods (Cooper, Fleischer, & Cotton, 2012; Mitchell, Friesen, Friesen, & Rose, 2007; Reisetter et al. 2004; Roberts & Castell, 2016), counseling trainees' perceptions of research training (Moran, 2011), and doctoral graduates' dissertation experiences (Burkard et al., 2014; Flynn, Chasek, Harper, Murphy, & Jorgensen, 2012). The majority of these studies have focused on students at undergraduate and doctoral levels,

with little attention paid to students at master's level (Anderson, Day, & McLaughlin, 2008; Pillay & Kritzinger, 2007). Moreover, in the case of counseling psychology in Thailand, where qualitative research is a relatively new phenomenon, to the best of my knowledge, there is no research to date investigating qualitative research experiences from the perspectives of Thai counseling psychology students. Given this existing gap in the current literature, this study was thus set out to investigate Thai master's level counseling graduates' experiences of undertaking qualitative research in order to give voice to their experience and identify implications for qualitative research training on the basis of its findings. This paper is part of a wider research on Thai master's level counseling graduates' motivation and experience of undertaking qualitative research. In this paper, I address the following question: What are the perceived barriers and facilitators to conducting qualitative research?

Research Methodology

As the aim of this study was to investigate the lived experience of conducting qualitative research, a qualitative design was employed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is a qualitative research approach drawing upon three primary theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography. While IPA prioritizes capturing the lived experience as given by the participants, it also emphasizes the need to further develop a more explicitly interpretative analysis in order to gain the deeper meanings underlying the participants' accounts. In other words, doing an IPA study involves an engagement in a double hermeneutic; "the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith et al., 2009, p.3). This reflects the dual role of the researcher who is required both to "give voice" and "make sense" of the participants' experiential accounts (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

Participants

In line with IPA's requirements for idiography and homogeneous sampling (Smith et al., 2009), participants were purposively recruited through professional contacts and snowballing. Participants were five female master's level counseling graduates who completed their qualitative research thesis. They were from a counseling psychology program and enrolled in an elective qualitative research methods course at a Thai university. To maintain anonymity of participants, the university name has been removed and the following pseudonyms are used in this paper: Jane, Lin, Ploy, Rose, and Ying.

Data Collection

To gain in-depth data on the participants' experience and meaning of doing qualitative research, this study used semi-structured interviews, the most common data collection method in IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009). The interview schedule began with an open-ended question asking participants to describe their paths to a qualitative thesis, followed by questions on experiences of completing a qualitative thesis, perceptions of qualitative research, and the impact of qualitative research experience. To increase the authenticity and richness of the data, the participants were encouraged to discuss their stories and ideas freely and to provide specific examples. The interviews, which took place in mutually convenient locations, were conducted in Thai, digitally recorded and lasted between 70 and 120 minutes.

Ethical Considerations

This research was received ethical approval by the university Ethics Committee. Prior to commencement, the participants were given detailed information about the research project. Written consent for participation in research was obtained. The study was considered to be minimal risk as the participants were not my students, reducing the possibility of undue influence. To maintain participant anonymity, pseudonyms for each participant are used and all identifying details from transcripts are removed and replaced with a description in parentheses.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the six analytical stages of IPA outlined by Smith et al. (2009):

1. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcript;
2. Descriptive, linguistic and conceptual notes were made on the transcript;
3. The initial notes were transformed into emergent themes that capture the meanings of the participants' accounts;
4. Emergent themes were clustered in superordinate themes and their related sub-themes;
5. The same procedures described above were repeated for the remaining transcripts; and
6. All the tables of themes were compared to identify patterns across cases.

It should be noted that the analysis process was not linear but iterative in that I went back and forth between identified themes and original data. Using the IPA framework of quality criteria (Smith, 2011), I provided two levels of interpretation: empathic hermeneutics (giving voice) and questioning hermeneutics (making sense). This means that within each theme, while grounding the analysis firmly in a close examination of the participants' accounts (my phenomenological

commitment), I made attempts to push the analysis further (my hermeneutic commitment). To demonstrate my idiographic commitment of IPA, I identified points of divergence and convergence in the participants' perspectives, making the breadth and depth of each theme visible.

Findings

This paper presents one significant aspect of the experience of doing qualitative research, namely "Facilitators and barriers in the qualitative research process". This superordinate theme illuminates counseling graduates' perceptions of what is helpful and challenging in the process of conducting qualitative research. Underlying this superordinate theme, there are four related sub-themes: "The late exposure to qualitative research learning", "Qualitative analysis as challenging", "The influential role of qualitative research advisors", and "The relevance of counseling and qualitative research skills".

The late exposure to qualitative research learning

All the participants indicated that they were enrolled in a qualitative research class in the second year of their master's degree. Many of them felt that this was too close to the time required for submitting a research proposal, leaving too little time for them to properly develop their qualitative research proposal.

I took a qualitative course in the first semester of my second year and after that course only two months later I had to submit my research proposal. It was too rushed to do things properly. (Ploy)

For the participants, a course in qualitative research methods should have been held in the first year, in parallel with a course in quantitative research methods. As Rose articulated:

The qualitative course should have been moved to the first year of our study, instead of the second year, so that students are well-informed before deciding which research approach to use. (Rose)

Jane's following account adds further comments:

The main problem was that we did not know what we wanted to do. I think there should have been a former coursework that helped us know more clearly which research approach we wanted to do. (Jane)

The above comment emerged from Jane' observation that although every student in her cohort took up the same course in qualitative methods, not everyone chose to undertake a qualitative thesis. "A former coursework", for Jane, seems to be an introductory research course,

covering both qualitative and quantitative research modules. Jane appears to believe that such course would equip students with the broad research knowledge and enabled them to sensibly choose a research approach that suits their interests. Due to the limited time spent on the practice of qualitative research, it is unsurprising that several participants found qualitative data analysis challenging, as will be delineated in the next theme.

Qualitative analysis as challenging

In the process of conducting qualitative research, four participants considered qualitative data analysis as the most challenging aspect. Central to participants' difficulties were feelings of uncertainty and incompetence. Ploy succinctly spoke about such challenge:

I found analyzing the data most difficult. There were loads of data. When I completed the analysis, the analysis did not seem complete. Loads of data were still up in the air. (Ploy).

The repeated word "loads of data" suggests a sense of being overwhelmed with massive volume of data. Finding out that the qualitative analysis process was not linear but iterative appears to make Ploy frustrated and thus perceived this process as "more difficult" than expected.

Similar to Ploy, Lin felt that the analytic part was more demanding than she had expected. The most challenging aspect of this task for Lin was to find suitable words that vividly capture the underlying meaning of data:

There were various ways to present the analysis, but which way was the most accurate? If we can find the right words, words that exactly reflect the data, then it is fine. But it was difficult to think, to find the right words. (Lin)

In this extract, Lin seems to imply that the process of qualitative data analysis requires the ability to tolerate ambiguity. The next extract from Jane further echoes this concept:

I think the data analysis was the most difficult part because it was something new in my life. I was unsure if my coding was right or wrong. I was often unsure how to code because I was not sure about the meaning of the data. Was it right? Sometimes I found myself listening repeatedly to the audio recording. (Jane)

The repetitive use of the words "unsure" indicates a sense of confusion and uncertainty. In qualitative analysis where there are multiple ways to conceptualize data, Jane felt incompetent in identifying the "right" words that capture meanings implicit in the data and she managed this struggle by immerging herself again into the data. The analytic struggle encountered was believed to be a result of her lack of experience in qualitative data analysis. Ying also made a similar point, but in a more precise way:

I had a strong background in quantitative, and I had never done qualitative research. I thought that I did my best with my analysis but found out from my advisor that it was not that way. For other parts of the research, if something went wrong, it did not take so much time to know. But for this part, I did not get the idea until the end. (Ying)

A sense of frustration permeated Ying's above account. That sense of frustration seems to be common and inevitable in the process of engaging with qualitative data that possesses multiple, fluid and complex meanings. In that way, an attempt to make such meanings clear and organized is thus challenging. It seems that for the participants engaging with qualitative data analysis is like going exploring unknown and messy territory on their own. As Ying made it clear, such territory requires us to keep exploring until its end in order to know that territory better and to start the journey all over again, with more confidence and direction. Again, Ying's account clearly suggests the impact of her strong quantitative background on her qualitative analytic struggles. In this respect, analyzing qualitative data can be particularly challenging for counseling students who are quantitatively oriented as the tasks run counter to the familiar way of data analysis.

The influential role of qualitative research advisors

All the participants indicated the significant influence of a qualitative research advisor on the process of learning and conducting qualitative research. Many of the participants highlighted the role of their qualitative instructor, who later became their principal advisor, in determining their choice of undertaking a qualitative thesis. This is most powerfully captured in an account from Rose:

*If there was no an instructor teaching qualitative research, I would have gone with the quantitative. (*Rose).

Qualitative research advisors also appear to be influential in the process of conducting qualitative research, from choosing a particular research methodology to assisting with data analysis and write-up.

In doing my research, I needed to rely on my advisor, she rescued me. I really trusted her. I chose to use (a particular qualitative methodology) because she thought it was the best for my work. (Ying) *My advisor helped me a lot while doing my thesis. When I did my analysis, she suggested how to do it.* (Ploy)

The sentence "she rescued me" suggests the strong reliance on the research advisor. Although all the participants completed a qualitative research course, they still felt inadequate, as Jane stated: *"It was not that we studied and then we could do it. I feel that I was able to it mostly because of my advisor. She taught me a lot while I was doing my research"* (Jane).

The participants' accounts above demonstrate how learning is an unfinished process, especially with this group of participants, who had limited preparation in qualitative research. The following extract provides the underlying reasons of such reliance:

If I had been well grounded in qualitative research, or if I had already done a thesis, it would have been easier for me to suggest my ideas to my advisor. (Ying)

Ying drew a comparison of the perceived proficiency between her advisor and herself. For Ying, the advisor deserved her trust because she was knowledgeable about qualitative research and theses procedures. Trust and power seem to be relevant; as the participants trust their advisors, the advisors have a power to influence them. Many participants also described their advisors as accessible, supportive, and helpful. These characteristics of advisors facilitated positive advisory relationships, making the participants feel comfortable to work with their advisors and make good progress.

The relevance of counseling and qualitative research skills

All the participants recognized the relevance and usefulness of counseling skills in conducting qualitative research. In fact, they felt that the process of collecting qualitative data that involves interacting with research participants and eliciting stories of experience was fairly easy and most enjoyable, suggesting a sense of competence. The participants seem to believe that such sense of competence came from their counseling abilities.

Counseling sills helped me a lot during the interviews. Listening to participants' stories, I often spotted something interesting. For example, they said that "it was good". I have learned in my counseling training that good for them and good for me are often different, so what is good for them. This is one thing that counseling was helpful. The second thing is that if they talked too long, summarizing is important. Third, looking at them, and observing their gestures, counseling helped me to notice their feelings and my reflections on their feelings helped them go on. (Ying)

In the above extract, Ying talked about the use and the usefulness of various counseling skills (i.e., listening without judgment, attending, summarizing, reflecting) in the interview process. This long extract is important in that it neatly demonstrates how counseling skills are used when collecting qualitative data and how they can potentially help generate more authentic ("so what is good for them) and in-depth data ("my reflections on their feelings helped them go on"). Saying that "listening to participants' stories, I often spotted something interesting", Ying implied that as a counseling trainee she had the skills for listening sensitively. In the below extract, Rose made a similar point in a different way:

I actually used counseling skills in my interviews. I felt that I was quicker to be aware of myself. I would cut off negative words, like "were you sad?", "were you disappointed?" I would not use such words at all in my interviews. (Interviewer: what would you say instead?). I would ask "how did you feel". (Rose)

While Ying's account indicates the impact of counseling skills on her sensitivity to others, Rose's account further reveals the interplay between sensitivity about oneself and sensitivity about others. It seems that for Rose her sensitivity leads to a careful use of non-judgmental language, which is in the form of open-ended questions. The following extracts further suggest shared features between counseling and qualitative research.

Counselors work through language. So, it requires us to be sensitive to language people use. (Jane)

The more I practice counseling, the more I find personal experience important. So, I would give attention to each individual experience. (Lin)

The first extract from Jane points to the central role of language in both counseling and qualitative work. The second extract indicates the fundamental focus of both counseling and qualitative work on individual's subjective experience. Overall, the participants' accounts suggest that counseling and qualitative research share many similarities and that there is the interplay between the two different domains. Ying's account clearly demonstrates this interplay:

Sometimes qualitative helped counseling. In my third year, I found it hard to differentiate between qualitative and counseling skills. It seemed that they have an impact on each other. (Ying)

Discussion

The results from this study have provided an insight into the barriers and facilitators in the process of undertaking qualitative research for masters'-level counseling graduates. In terms of the barriers, some participants' accounts indicated that the late exposure to qualitative research learning was a central barrier for their competence and preparedness to do qualitative research, a perspective supported by previous research (Mitchell et al., 2007; Roberts & Castell, 2016; Wiggins, Godon-Filayson, Becker, & Sullivan, 2015). Similar to the participants in my study, third year undergraduate psychology students in the study of Roberts and Castell (2016) perceived themselves more quantitatively oriented and considered the emphasis of research training on quantitative methods in the first two years as a barrier for them when learning qualitative methods. Mitchell et al. (2007) commented that the delay in offering qualitative research training within the

psychology curriculum “reinforces a false schism between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ science and suggests a hierarchy between quantitative and qualitative methods” (p. 233).

Due to the participants’ limited training in qualitative methods and the complex nature of qualitative research (Thorne, 2000), it is thus unsurprising that many participants in this study considered data analysis as the most challenging aspect in the process of undertaking qualitative research, corresponding with the difficulties encountered during the qualitative research process indicated by the students in other studies (Cooper et al., 2012; Sargeant, 2012). Participants’ descriptions of the challenges in analyzing qualitative data resonate well with the notion of circularity described by Yeh and Inman (2007) who portrayed qualitative research analysis as “a circular, fluid, and ongoing process that requires examination and reexamination on multiple levels at different points in time” (p. 384). Owing to the iterative process of qualitative data analysis, it is not surprising that a sense of frustration and being overwhelmed was indicated in this study, a finding also supported by previous studies (Cooper et al., 2012; Turner & Crane, 2016; Sargeant, 2012). To overcome feelings of uncertainty and frustration during the stage of data analysis requires “the ability to tolerate or even relish ambiguity, complexity and fuzziness” (Probst et al., 2016, p. 334). Consistent with the previous study (Anderson et al., 2008), this current study indicated that research advisors play an even more central role during the stages of data analysis and writing up.

Moving on to the facilitating factors, the findings indicated the influential role of qualitative research advisors. One participant used a strong expression “she rescued me” to describe the significant role of her advisor during the qualitative research process. The participants in this study portrayed their advisor as being expert and giving valuable support and guidance and they felt the need to rely on their advisor’s advice due to their limited knowledge in qualitative research. These findings concur with the findings of previous studies that pointed out the link between psychology students’ limited exposure to qualitative research training and a lack of confidence in their competence to undertake qualitative research (Mitchell et al., 2007; Povee & Roberts, 2014), and can be juxtaposed to previous studies which revealed that research instructors and advisors themselves also found qualitative research teaching and supervision challenging and demanding due to the frequent domination of quantitative training in the psychology curriculum (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Wiggins et al., 2015). In addition, the findings confirm Turner and Crane’s (2016) reflection that learning and teaching qualitative research are continuing processes. As students often have limited preparation in qualitative research, research advisors usually act as qualitative research instructors. Learning more about qualitative research through the supervising relationship facilitates a bridge between knowledge from qualitative coursework and the actual application of qualitative methodology. Mentorship has also been vastly documented in the literature as a key

facilitator that students perceived contributed to their research progress and success (Anderson et al., 2008; Burkard et al., 2014; Flynn et al., 2012; Jorgensen & Duncan, 2015a; Lamar & Helm, 2017).

Additionally, the participants in this study expressed a sense of competence in the process of collecting qualitative data. Specifically, they found the interview process manageable and they attributed this sense of competence to their counseling abilities. This was contrary to a previous study from a different discipline by Jacob and Furgerson (2012) indicating that their students often experienced difficulties in conducting interviews to generate rich and relevant data. The findings of this study also suggested the relevance and interplay between counseling and qualitative research. Participant voices concerning such interplay particularly resonate with Thorpe's (2013) assertion that: "one of the ways of augmenting therapeutic training of post-graduate counseling psychology students is through the students' experience of conducting qualitative research" (p. 35). The connections between the principles and skills behind qualitative research and those behind counseling have been well documented in the literature, suggesting a dynamic interplay and fit between the activity of doing qualitative research and the activity of doing therapy (Farber, 2006; McLeod, 2011; Reisetter et al., 2004). Letourneau (2015) notes that "drawing parallels between counseling and qualitative research may also help students to begin to develop a research-practitioner identity" (p. 377). The literature beyond counseling psychology revealed that researchers in different fields also emphasized the importance of learning counseling skills to enhance interviewing skills (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2008; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). For example, Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) reported that participants (health researchers) in their study found specific training in counseling skills necessary for qualitative researchers, especially for those engaged in research on sensitive issues. The current findings thus bolster widely held beliefs about the value of counseling skills in conducting qualitative research.

Implications for qualitative research training in counselor education

One of the main findings indicated that a delay in exposure to a qualitative course is a significant barrier for students to be adequately prepared for carrying out qualitative research projects. Based on this finding, I recommend offering a coursework in qualitative research methods in the first year of a master's study, rather than in its second year. One basic reason of this is that students need time to cultivate new knowledge and skills. More importantly, mater's counseling psychology students in Thailand are usually required to complete and submit their research proposal in the second year of their programs, being exposed to qualitative research training at the time very close to the submission of a research proposal is thus clearly inappropriate.

Additionally, the challenges that counseling graduates mainly encountered in the process of undertaking qualitative research seem to be fundamentally rooted in their limited prior training in qualitative research, due to the quantitative dominance in counseling psychology programs. Cox (2012) comments that "privileging quantitative methods and the underlying positivist worldview can very easily subordinate qualitative research to a marginal role" (p. 130). Given the close relation between qualitative research and counseling practice, qualitative research has the potential to foster students' development of a research-practitioner identity (Letourneau, 2015; Moran, 2011).

In line with the literature called for increased methodological pluralism in counselor education (e.g., Benishek & Chessler, 2005; Moran, 2011; Ponterotto, 2005; Poulin, 2007; Reisetter et al., 2004), the findings of this study point to the pressing need for counseling psychology programs in Thailand to further strive to provide a balance of research courses within the counseling psychology curriculum that offers future students opportunities to learn to do research from both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Specifically, master's level counseling students should be exposed to at least one introductory course in qualitative research methods, and one more advanced qualitative research course should also be available for students who are interested in undertaking qualitative research projects. I strongly believe that such an emphasis on methodological pluralism within counseling research training has the strong potential to increase students' interest in research and research productivity, thereby fostering the advance of our psychological and therapeutic knowledge.

Suggestions for future research

Based upon the findings and limitations of this study, several promising research directions require further scrutiny. Firstly, findings from this study were based on a small number of participants selected from a single university setting. Similar studies, in different contexts, are thus needed to confirm and expand the findings of this current study. Secondly, more in-depth qualitative studies are also needed to expand and further clarify some of the themes presented in this study. Given the perceived challenge of analyzing qualitative data, future research may specifically explore perceived barriers in the process of qualitative research analysis and how might such barriers be overcome. Such studies may be investigated from the perspectives of either students or educators. Thirdly, future research may use other data collection methods such as focus group interviews and written accounts from reflective journals, coupled with in-depth interviews to elicit further details of experiences. Lastly, future research could also use a qualitative longitudinal design to examine developmental progressions, identifying how students' experience of undertaking qualitative research might change over time.

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