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The Therapeutic Nature of Qualitative Interviewing: Benefits of Research Participation

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THE THERAPEUTIC NATURE OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING: BENEFITS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

This research explored the notion that interview studies can be therapeutic for participants. It examines the common themes that participants report as beneficial from participating in a study about the transition from higher education to post-university life. The findings are presented as common themes and illuminated by participant excerpts. It is concluded that there are therapeutic characteristics to the qualitative interview process that mirror some of the benefits individuals can receive from the counseling process.

Introduction

There are many benefits associated with qualitative research, and particularly interview studies. Such benefits include exploring lived experiences, meaning-making, and understanding individual perspectives (Hatch, 2000). From a different lens, therapy and having discussions with a mental health professional also reap many benefits, such as self-empowerment (Castillo, Jadorf, Thélémaque, King, & Duhamel, 2012) and behavior change (Britt, Blampied, & Hudson, 2003). As separate entities, these interactions serve different purposes, have different intentions and the individuals facilitating them have different qualifications and motives. However, through the exploration of literature and an interview study conducted on the post-university transition, many beneficial outcomes often associated with therapy were found to be inadvertently met through in-depth qualitative interviews. Before the data is presented on this exploration of 'research as therapy,' the qualitative study from which this idea originated is first discussed to provide context and relevance. Following the context, which includes a summary of the original research and findings, previous literature on the notion of 'research as therapy' is presented. From there, the methodological approach and research design to both the original study and the current associated follow-up study are described. Finally, the research findings are presented along with the project summary, limitations, and recommendations.

Context

Bridges (2004) defined a transition as "a natural process of disorientation or re-orientation," marking the turning points of life (p. 3). One such turning point that has recently attracted higher education attention is the shift from university to life-after-study. Some universities have developed programs and courses to help prepare and support students for this transition. However, most of these educational initiatives have been developed without empirical research exploring graduates' needs. In the original study (Perry, 2012), the aim was to understand recent graduates' experiences and perspectives in the post-university transition with the hope that the findings may inform institutional practices. This qualitative study (Perry, 2012) aimed to explore three research questions:

- (1) What are the experiences of young, recent university graduates?

- (2) What are the perspectives of young, recent university graduates?
- (3) What are the resultant recommendations for institutions wishing to support their graduating students?

Twenty young, recent graduates, who were broadly representative of their (U.S.) university's student population in terms of degree, gender, and ethnicity, participated in the study. *Young graduates* were defined as those who attended university immediately after high school and were transitioning into a full-time, non-academic environment for the first time. *Recent graduates* were defined as those who had graduated within the previous year. The twenty graduates participated in in-depth interviews and self-reflective journaling for six consecutive months. Transcripts of interviews were analyzed using typical qualitative procedures informed by interpretivism, symbolic interactionism, naturalistic inquiry, and narrativity. Results indicated that despite individual variability, participants shared some common perspectives.

In exploring research questions one and two, the data indicated four main themes of the post-university transition: shifting identities, searching, unmet expectations, and stabilizers. Sub-themes within *shifting identities* illustrated that life was different (in terms of comfort zones, relationships, interests, perspectives, routines, and living situation) for the participants before they graduated and that their perceptions had shifted (or were shifting). For example, one recent university graduate said, "Since I didn't have an environment defining me, I had to start answering questions..., and that's everything... My identity isn't a student anymore" (Perry, 2012, p. 133).

Within the *searching* theme, sub-themes represented more emotional elements of transition—aspects of life that the participants did not have (e.g., certainty and direction). Still, they were seeking (e.g., fulfillment, happiness, and meaningful relationships). A research participant said:

I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with my life! I keep trying to tell myself that I'm still young, and that's okay... a lot of people don't know, but it's hard to have that mindset after you've gone through four years of college. You feel like you go to high school, go to college, get a job, have a family, and live happily ever after. I guess I feel like I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with my life... and my degree is so broad that's it's hard to narrow it down to what I'm supposed to do (Perry, 2012, p. 150).

The sub-themes in *unmet expectations* exemplified the participants' perceptions of themselves, their degree (entitlement), job searching, the workplace transition, earning potential, finances, the economy, and other challenges in the post-university transition. One participant said, "I think my expectations were a little high... like I would get a degree, graduate in four years, send out my resume, and have a high paying job" (Perry, 2012, p. 163).

Although these findings illustrated that graduates were experiencing difficulties in their post-university transition, the data also indicated that participants found *stabilizers* that helped support and balance their transition. These included support systems, groups/activities, faith, health, and accepting uncertainties by "living for the moment." For example, a participant said, "I've continued to stay connected to family and friends. In terms of emotional stability, they've been a support, and my faith has naturally played a strong part in that as well" (Perry, 2012, p. 181).

Previous literature identified a range of emotions that often accompany transitions. Williams' (1999) transition cycle demonstrated a scale from feeling good to distress/despair, depending on whether the transition was instigated by a positive event or a trauma/loss. Most of

the research participants described graduating from university as a positive event but still felt a range of both positive and negative emotions throughout the research period. Schlossberg (1984) explained that the crisis point in the process of generativity (renewal) includes feelings of being "boxed in and frightened about the future" (p. 33), which the findings from this research demonstrated. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) and Bridges (2004) emphasized the importance of recognizing and understanding the stages of transition to be more emotionally prepared. By understanding the complexity and range of emotions that recent graduates feel in the post-university transition, higher education practitioners may be better informed on helping prepare and support their students/graduates.

Based on an interpretation of the research findings and other participants' comments about ways the institution might have helped them, recommendations for institutional support around this transition (research question three) were made. These recommendations provide practical strategies within three primary categories- career preparation, emotional support, and practical life skills, and specifically:

- final-year seminars/courses (that encompass all three elements of support),
- offering more rigorous internship programs,
- networking opportunities with professionals,
- career-skills training,
- on-going career and counseling services for recent graduates,
- student support groups,
- transition awareness education, and
- life-skills training.

Perry (2012) concluded that there is a need to guide students in managing their own expectations (about transition and life after university) by understanding their shifting identities and the uncertainty that often accompanies the post-university transition. Based on the data's interpretation, any strategy, program, or initiative that fosters the opportunity for such is likely to help prepare and support students in this transition.

As with any empirical study, some of the findings indicated potential opportunities for future research. Although the notion of 'research as therapy' did not address one of three research questions from the original study and subsequently was not a part of the data presentation and findings, it did come up as an emergent theme to explore in future studies. The study participants often referred to the research interviews as a therapeutic mechanism for helping them cope with their transition. "There is a small body of literature on research as therapy, and using the research findings to explore this topic further may be useful" (Perry, 2012, p. 223).

This context leads to the current exploration of viewing research, mainly qualitative interviews, as providing similar outcomes and benefits to research participants as does therapy for clients. This paper's data and quotes are partially from the original 2009-2010 interviews with recent college graduates. However, to fully explore this notion of 'research as therapy,' follow-up interviews with the participants were conducted in 2015 (6 years after college graduation; 5 years after the original data were collected). In these follow-up interviews, this emergent finding from the original study was directly addressed, and the research participants offered their perspectives on this notion. This new data (from 2015) is also presented throughout the findings section of this paper. The following literature review will address the link between qualitative research and

therapy. Previous research has suggested that participants have a positive experience from this type of data collection. Evidence will be brought forward, introducing the idea that the qualitative research interview can be a therapeutic process for participants.

Literature Review

Although research and therapy are not considered to work with each other, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest otherwise. Qualitative research requires some type of interview process or questionnaire. There is evidence that the interview itself has a therapeutic quality. Berger and Malkinson (2000) explored the therapeutic impact research can have on participants. The act of interviewing involves the researcher asking questions and the subject or participant responding. When asked correctly, this can facilitate closeness and feeling that the researcher truly cares about the participant. These feelings are the foundations of rapport (Berger & Malkinson, 2000). This review of literature addresses:

- a.) the importance of approaching research through a new lens,
- b.) building rapport,
- c.) the shared benefits of both research and therapy (including reflection, meaning-making, and empowerment),
- d.) some implications based on previous research from the counseling sector that can better inform qualitative interview strategies.

Approaching Research Through a Psychotherapy Lens

The qualitative interview is a process, and because of this, researchers should understand the therapeutic process and the implications of that for participants. Nelson, Onwuegbuzie, Wines, and Frels (2013) explored this relationship's importance throughout the research and interview process. They hold that qualitative interviews can be "beneficial and curative for researchers and participants alike" (p. 3). The unexpected changes that can occur for both researchers and participants were examined in their study. To investigate this relationship and the changes that can happen, researchers reviewed different therapeutic interview strategies that enhanced the research process's overall quality. By using therapy approaches to interviewing, participants had a more meaningful experience.

Nelson et al. (2013) described the interview process itself as generating as much meaning for the interviewee as the data itself, if not more. This study also referred to the interviewers as "counselor researchers" (p. 2). The research relationship is highlighted, and strategies for fostering a therapeutic interview process were created based on family systems therapy models to enhance research outcomes ultimately. At the core of these strategies is the therapeutic conversation, demonstrating its importance and the need to always come back to this within an interview. Nelson et al. (2013) the study compared the qualitative interview to a therapeutic relationship, but they argued that by modeling the interview on therapeutic modalities, a more meaningful and significant interview could be held.

Building Rapport

Face-to-face interviews offer observation when other forms of interviewing (i.e., phone or email) do not. This observation allows researchers to examine facial expressions, movements, and other nonverbal communication patterns. In-person interviews give the researchers and interviewees a chance to build rapport. The extent to which rapport is built directly correlates to

the level of disclosure and overall quality of the interview (Berger & Malikinson, 2000). This holds true in therapeutic relationships, as well. The openness participants feel that once rapport is found essential, the interviewer can be present, nonjudgmental, or reactive. These qualities ensure the researcher is prepared for any content the participant might divulge, giving them the greatest opportunity to share their story for the interview (Birch & Miller, 2000). Multiple interviews allow for an even greater level of trust and rapport to be established. This sense of safety helps studies that require an interviewee to disclose difficult or emotionally laden experiences (Nelson et al., 2013).

Knox and Burkard (2009) hold that this relationship's strength is the most crucial piece of qualitative research. All data is collected through this relationship, and a stronger connection makes for more valid data. Encouragers, open-ended questions and reflection of feelings are all strategies in which a good interviewer helps build rapport and illicit open and honest responses from the interviewee (Knox & Burkard, 2009). These are also strategies used by therapists for the same reason to tell their stories.

Shared Benefits of Both Research and Therapy

As noted previously, there are direct and indirect ways in which participants benefit from research. The interview process itself, within qualitative research, can prompt reflection. This reflection is the major component for change within an individual or creating more positive thoughts. This new sense of awareness and insight can result in real, lasting change for individuals. The researchers themselves also affect participants by merely taking part in the interview process with them and creating a relationship that, in many ways, is similar to that of a therapeutic relationship. It is suggested that the interview process helps participants feel valued instead of simply being used for research (Castillo et al., 2012). This further develops a sense of rapport between participant and researcher. Intervention and change can occur for participants as an outcome of feeling valued within the research process itself (Boudah & Lenz, 2000). Open-ended questions are often key in helping participants have new insights and honest reflection. These types of questions are also a hallmark of therapy, adding to the idea of a therapeutic relationship. Boudah and Lenz (2000) described trustworthiness as the extent to which the researcher can trust their findings. It would seem that a better relationship between researcher and participant would lead to more trustworthy answers during the interview and thus creating more valid results for the study. Boudah and Lenz stated this relationship "should not be ignored" (Boudah & Lenz, 2000, p. 153).

Birch and Miller (2000) were conducting different studies, Birch on women becoming mothers, and Miller on individuals' experiences in group therapy reconstructing their self-identity. Both found that participants viewed the intimate research style interviews to be therapeutic. Birch and Miller (2000) encouraged participants to share their experiences openly and honestly. Participants reported that the opportunity to share their experience and reflect on it was somewhat therapeutic. This study refers to the term therapeutic as "a process by which an individual reflects on, and comes to understand previous experiences in different - sometimes more positive - ways that promote a changed sense of self" (p. 190). The interviews were purposely designed to be unstructured and encourage exploration of the participants' experiences that they may or may not have been previously shared. This lack of structure led to an uninterrupted narration style by participants of past experiences, which coincided with the view that the interview itself was therapeutic. By letting participants freely narrate their stories, they

could have a new understanding of past experiences. Birch and Miller (2000) suggested that this narration was an outlet by which individuals could sense their experiences by translating their sense of "self" into language. Retelling stories, especially those with negative thoughts or emotions around them, can be therapeutic by reconstructing negative views into positive ones. Therapeutic relationships are founded on active listening, and the style of interviewing discussed by Birch and Miller (2000) reflected that.

Castillo et al. (2012) investigated the benefits that participants personally experienced by being subjects in a research experiment. The original study explored diversity and the barriers for different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic families within the healthcare system. Participants were asked questions related to what they were most proud of regarding their research participation in this study. Some of the benefits were perceived as indirect to participants, but direct benefits included feeling empowered and increased knowledge that came from participating in the study (Castillo et al., 2012). Reasons for taking part in a study included "altruism, concerns about care, the need to talk to someone, and the need for information or access to services" (Castillo et al., 2012, p. 61).

Similarly, these are often reasons and subsequent feelings associated with participating in therapy. Grafanaki (2012) explored the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client. Clients described the research experience as "enlightening, worthwhile, a powerful piece of learning, positive influence, a privilege, luxury to have access to such information, lots of learning about self, and a great surprise" (Grafanaki, 2012, p. 198). Grafanaki (2012) also found a positive impact on the researcher, demonstrating insight about sensitivity, ethical boundaries, and how to conduct qualitative research about therapy in general better.

Implications to Better Inform Qualitative Research Strategies

Ivey, Ivey, and Zalaquett (2014) described an overlap between interviewing and counseling, suggesting there are aspects of interviewing in counseling. Within therapy, there is a method used called motivational interviewing (MI). It is a client-centered counseling style used to aid clients in behavior change by resolving ambivalence within themselves. MI is used to motivate clients to become open to change on their own. There are many characteristics and techniques involved in MI. Empathy and a belief that ambivalence is normal are fundamental to MI. The counselor repeatedly points out any discrepancies or ambivalence to the client until the client recognizes this. This is the point that helps elicit a desire for change within the client (Britt et al., 2003). Empathy is important because, without it, the counselor could encounter resistance from the client. MI also operates on the understanding that clients have the answers to their problems, and they are responsible for personal change. Within the counseling relationship, MI encourages clients to take an active role in their wellness (Britt et al., 2003).

Active empathetic listening is an essential counseling skill utilized by numerous treatment modalities. Active listening is referred to as "listening, reflecting, and summarizing" (Jones, Latchford, & Tober, 2016, p. 103). The counselor's job within MI is to draw content from the information the client has said through encouraging, reflecting, and asking open-ended questions. Therapist qualities are also vital to the success of the counseling relationship. These qualities include competence, positive personal qualities, and equality (Jones et al., 2016). A counseling relationship's success is contingent on client autonomy, feeling like they have been listened to, the counselor not imposing ideas, and helping them talk through or confront an issue. These

qualities of the therapist and the relationship, in general, add to a positive outcome for clients (Jones et al., 2016).

Research on the therapeutic dynamic between therapist and client can help bridge qualitative research to therapy. When researchers view qualitative interviews through a psychotherapy lens, they can employ specific counseling strategies, such as empathy, active listening, competence, and positivity. Based on research and theory, utilization of these strategies can help develop a further rapport with research participants and subsequently uncover more in-depth, more trustworthy research results that, in turn, can benefit both the researcher and the participant. Based on the previous research presented here and the demonstrated overlapping between qualitative research interviews and counseling strategies, the following section of this paper presents the methodological underpinnings and theoretical lenses used to address the research questions and inform the research design within the current study.

Methodology and Research Design

Similar to Birch and Miller's (2000) study, this study (original and follow-up) was designed to allow the research participants to freely narrate their stories and form new understandings of past experiences. Soliciting such narratives was underpinned by a specific methodological paradigm and approached through a combination of theoretical lenses described in this section, followed by a brief description of how the data was collected and analyzed.

Research Paradigm & Contributing Approaches

Based on the ontological and epistemological assumptions, the methodological assumptions are hermeneutical (of interpretation) (Guba and Lincoln, 2001). It is believed "interpretation lays the groundwork for understanding, which is the process of interpreting, knowing, and comprehending the meaning of experience" (Denzin, 2002, p. 360). Therefore, the researcher's views fall within the research paradigm of interpretivism (Richie & Lewis, 2003; Maxwell, 2005; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), also referred to as constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Hatch, 2002). Higgs and Trede (2010) defined the goal of research in the interpretive paradigm as being "to understand, interpret, seek meaning, describe, illuminate, and theorise" (p. 34), which were my aims for both the original study (Perry, 2012) and the follow-up study further to explore the specific theme of 'research as therapy.'

There were three contributing interpretive approaches which combined to inform the research design, analysis, and interpretation: 1.) Symbolic interactionism enabled understanding around the participants' interactions, interpretations, and meaning-making (Blumer, 1969; Bodgan & Biklen, 1998); 2.) Naturalistic inquiry served as a foundation for the emergent design and data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); 3.) Narrativity provided a theoretical foundation for structuring interviews to find meaning through gathering the participants' stories (Hatch, 2002). These approaches complement one another and support the belief that meaning can be made through interpretations of interactions, stories, events, and life experiences.

Data Collection

In the original study (Perry, 2012), twenty young, recent university graduates engaged in monthly in-depth interviews and self-reflective journaling for six consecutive months (2009-2010), as described previously in the context section of this paper. For the follow-up study (five years after the last interview was facilitated), the twenty original research participants were

contacted via email. They were asked about their interest and availability in a follow-up interview to take the first steps in a longitudinal study on the post-university transition.

Of the twenty original participants, sixteen agreed to participate in the follow-up study. Based on the participants' availability, semi-structured phone interviews were scheduled and recorded between July and December in 2015. These interviews were approximately one hour and prompted a discussion about the participants' lives since the previous study. Specific questions regarding emergent themes from the original study were addressed, and the notion of 'research as therapy' was one of those topics.

Data Analysis

The analysis was an on-going process throughout this project. This was an evolving process from reading field notes and typing transcripts to coding data and correlating the themes back to the literature. After the data had been systematically coded and organized in the original study, it was analyzed in monthly intervals looking for themes and patterns across time, what Yin (2003) calls time-series analysis. In both the original and follow-up studies, the data were analyzed from one participant to the next, looking for consistencies and differences, which Yin (2003) calls cross-case synthesis. Researcher interpretations were then taken back to the participants, and they were invited to offer additional feedback and confirm or clarify the analysis. Through the participants' involvement, the emergent data's meanings were further constructed, interpreted, and triangulated. Based on this approach to analysis in the follow-up study, the findings specific to 'research as therapy' were categorized into themes. These themes are presented in-depth in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

There were multiple themes found within the follow-up interviews around the notion of 'research as therapy.' Many of these themes also directly tie back to the research studies discussed in this paper's literature review. The data and quotes presented in this section are from both the 2010 interviews with the recent college graduates and the follow-up interviews of 2015. The findings are presented here through five emergent themes: the therapeutic nature of research, reflection, self-awareness, being heard and taken seriously a sense of community and belonging, and contribution to research.

Therapeutic Nature of Research

Numerous participants explicitly described the interview process as being therapeutic. Being asked open-ended questions and giving a person the space to speak freely often gives them the power to think through their thoughts. Piper reported in 2010 about her experience as a research participant, "It ended up being so therapeutic. I think that people just don't take the time to really reflect, and it's necessary to grow...it just helped me put life into perspective." When reading this statement in the 2015 follow-up interview, Piper said, "Yeah, I completely still agree with 2010 Piper." This demonstrates she viewed the interview process as therapeutic even after five years.

Shannon spoke highly of the study in her 2010 interview, "I have loved participating in this study. It has helped me look at my life and reflect on where I am currently and where I have been." She described the reflective nature of the interviews as, "It's almost like therapy." Participants felt a positive outcome from taking part in the original interview process directly

relating it to therapy. In her 2010 interview, Lisa explained, "It has given me a therapy session each month to talk about this interesting process and a place to vent to." Lisa used the interview process as a form of personal therapy, and she felt safe to discuss her thoughts and feelings openly. In the 2015 interview, Talon recounted, "I think unquestionably it [the 2010 interview study] was therapeutic," showing that he too found the initial interview process to have a therapeutic quality even years later.

This theme is in alignment with those found in previous literature. Berger and Malkinson (2000) reported that the interview process builds a relationship, and when the participants feel as if the researcher truly cares, they may view the process as more therapeutic. Furthermore, Nelson et al. (2013) discussed how the qualitative interview could benefit from using therapeutic modalities. This helps the researcher build a relationship with the interviewee translating into a more meaningful experience for both. "The ability of the counselor researcher and the participants to have a therapeutic conversation and to enhance the authenticity of the entire research process" is important to the overall outcome of the research as well as helping the interviewee feel validated (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 6). The findings of this study support the previous literature and echo how participants felt in the research process.

Reflection and Self-Awareness

Multiple participants discussed how the interview process encouraged them to be more self-reflective in general. Many of them have applied this skill and the knowledge they learned about themselves from the interview process in thinking about the future. Nick shared in his 2010 interview, "This entire reflective process has helped me be proud of what I came from, content with where I am, and confident about the future." In her 2015 interview, Lisa declared, "It was and continues to be such a wonderful experience because I learned so much about myself... and realized truly how much the things we discussed taught me about myself... and has impacted who I am today and the way that I look at the world." Participants were able to reflect on their experience through the interview process, which led to a greater sense of self-awareness.

Participants viewed the interview process as a means of personal exploration that led to lasting realizations they carried with them even after the study ended. For example, in his 2010 interview, Justin said:

I really can't tell you how much it has helped me develop. It has allowed me to see what I am capable of, both good and bad. It has been therapeutic in that I can share my life with an outsider. Professionally, it has allowed me to measure myself outside of the glare of a raise or a star from my bosses. Personally, it is a reminder that things aren't always as bad as they seem and that things can always be better and worse. I would suggest this process for every graduating college student.

The research's lasting effect on participants' ability to reflect and become more self-aware was apparent in many sentiments shared.

Some participants viewed reflection as an integral part of growth and moving forward. Macey said in 2010, "I think even being a part of this process has helped me with my transition," and in 2015, she said, "I get to reflect on me as an individual about where I am as an adult." Participants also felt a sense of being grateful for the experience and the awareness they gained. Christine stated in her 2010 interview:

It was almost therapeutic...like talking it out or typing it out helped me realize my feelings about the process sometimes...this process forced me to think about it [transition], and I'm so grateful for that because I think it helped me sort out a lot of things!

In her 2015 interview, she reiterated this same notion, "It makes you feel better to talk it out ...and then I'm like, oh my gosh, I didn't even know I felt that way."

Participants may not have been searching for reflection and self-awareness, but the interview process provided a space for this to occur naturally. Ivey et al. (2014) discussed how Motivational Interviewing, a counseling theory, is used to help clients resolve ambivalence around behaviors, thoughts, or changes. This is precisely what Christine was describing. The interview process itself often prompts reflection, which leads to a sense of awareness and insight. This reflection and awareness play a role in creating lasting positive change (Boudah & Lenz, 2000). As mentioned in the literature review, the relationship between interviewer and participant is an important aspect of how comfortable participants feel reflecting and sharing their thoughts. Birch and Miller (2000) found that using an intimate and revealing researching style helped elicit responses that created awareness for the interviewee. By inviting participants to re-tell past experiences, people had the opportunity to construct and reconstruct their narratives in many different ways. This gives people a chance to reflect and create self-awareness around their experiences.

Being Heard and Taken Seriously

The desire to be heard is what brings many individuals into counseling or therapy in general. Using empathetic questioning and listening skills allow participants to feel heard by the interviewer. These are skills utilized by actual counselors and therapists, making the connection between qualitative interviewing and the therapeutic process even stronger. For example, during his 2015 interview, Talon expressed, "You know, of course, especially in the day of social media, we all feel a desire to be heard." Talon's statement explores the feelings of isolation some people may experience in a social media-driven society. The interview process gave him an outlet to discuss his thoughts, which helped him feel heard. Lisa, in her 2015 interview, expressed:

You didn't offer any therapy or advice or anything like that. I think that was the better part of it... that you just listened and just having someone to listen and understand... that you're not there to fix me, you're not there to make me better, you're not there to tell me how to do it... You're just there to talk to me and to ask me questions and to make me think. I was able to voice things that I wouldn't have had the avenue to voice or known how to communicate them.

Building trust allows people to feel safe in being honest and thus satisfying a desire to be heard. Nick reflected on the 2010 interview process and expressed in 2015 that he was validated because he felt heard and understood:

Like whatever I tell you it is... you accept that, and I think that is different than just being reflective on my own... because I know someone is receiving that without condition...it makes you feel more confident in your truths and sort of validating your experience, that what you're experiencing is okay.

Participants reacted strongly to the fact that they felt heard by the interviewer. The empathetic relationship helped them to speak honestly and have a positive, therapeutic-like experience.

Being taken seriously can be hard for young adults as they enter their careers, and many are simply trying to figure out how to be on their own after college (Perry, 2012). In her 2010 interview, Christine said, “You treated us as human beings and not ‘subjects,’ so that made me feel that my responses were more validated.” She felt taken seriously as a person instead of simply being looked at as a data source. Piper verbalized in her 2015 interview that there was “...A sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, and being taken seriously too... so that’s part of it too, just feeling like I’m being taken seriously as an adult.” Feeling valuable to the world can be a confidence booster for a young adult both professionally and personally.

These feelings helped facilitate the rapport and relationship that created a good interview. These are also the foundations of a therapeutic relationship. When participants are given this opportunity, they can appreciate the value of expressing feelings and past emotions in a way that is most beneficial to them. Many participants described how they felt heard and that the interview process helped them come to better understandings. This, in essence, is generating meaning. As stated by Nelson et al. (2013), the interview process itself can be beneficial to the interviewee, helping them develop meaning when they otherwise may not have done so independently.

Sense of Community and Belonging

In her 2015 interview, Piper said:

The nature of the study, the background that you had given us, and the questions you were asking... you made me realize, like, I’m not an outlier, I’m not going crazy, I’m not wasting my life here... there’s a whole group of people, enough that she’s studying this transition.

Sentiments like this indicated the participants often felt lonely in their transition, but the research process proved they were not alone, thus helping them feel part of a bigger group. For example, in 2010, Amber said, "It has helped a lot to know that I am not alone... knowing that this [transition] is puzzling enough to research is comforting." In her 2015 interview, she reflected, "It did help a lot to feel I was normal... and that in the midst of transition and the midst of turmoil... to know that it’s okay what I was thinking and feeling."

These statements demonstrate that Amber benefitted from the sense of belonging she felt through the interview process. She understood that because this transition was being studied, other people were experiencing similar feelings and adjustments. In her 2010 interview, Julie reported, "It’s nice knowing too, that you’re not the only one in this transition in life." This normalizing of the participants’ experience was therapeutically beneficial for them. They felt part of a collective group of people, offering themselves comfort through this sense of belonging. Castillo et al. (2012) described altruism as a reason for participating in a research study. This could relate to the importance of community and belonging that some participants discussed. Knowing they are not alone may increase their desire to help others in the same position or simply to feel connected to other human beings.

Contribution to the Research

Many participants felt strongly about the importance of the research and found that the interview style helped them gain perspective. "Knowing that this could help other people in the future, making this transition a little easier to understand makes me feel better, too," Julie said in her 2010 interview. She felt proud to be taking part in research that could benefit others in a similar situation. In his 2015 interview, Justin said, "I think your research provides an opportunity to give body to a person's life, and for me, it's powerful." Describing the research process as "powerful" and an "opportunity" highlight that he felt attached to the research and proud to have contributed. In her 2010 interview, Samantha exclaimed, "I think this research is amazing and extremely beneficial!" This description showcases how much value Samantha placed on the research. This could mean it was beneficial to her and other people in a similar situation in the future.

This relates to previous literature by Castillo et al. (2012). They discuss the reasons for participating in research studies, being a mix of personal interests and motivations relating to helping others. Participants felt that an indirect benefit of taking part in this study was the potential for helping others and the increase in the knowledge they gained. This echoes the idea that participants felt they contributed to something, giving them a sense of empowerment (Castillo et al., 2012).

In this section, the findings were presented through five emergent themes: the therapeutic nature of research, reflection, and self-awareness, being heard and taken seriously, a sense of community and belonging, and contribution to research. The findings were discussed in conjunction with previous literature, which demonstrates strong connections between research and therapy. These findings support the notion that research, particularly qualitative interview studies, can serve as a form of indirect therapy. In the following and final section of this paper, conclusions are drawn from the study that point toward future implications and recommendations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research came about by noticing the secondary benefits participants gained when partaking in a qualitative interview study. Many participants discussed the therapeutic nature of the qualitative interviews exploring the transition from university to full-time immersion in the non-academic world. Previously presented research has suggested there are benefits of qualitative interviews for both participant and researcher. A link between interview style and the nature of the relationship between participant and interviewee has also been established. These benefits align with those found in this research leading to the conclusion that qualitative research can be therapeutic for participants. Researchers that build rapport, authenticity, and a safe space for interviewees to discuss the research topics help facilitate this therapeutic process.

Limitations, Implications, and Potential for Future Research

While there was a range of diversity among research participants regarding their degree, gender, and ethnicity (representative of their undergraduate institution), the sample size was somewhat small. This indicates the need for further research to identify if the themes presented are applicable to larger sample size. Themes may also vary throughout different cultures, warranting further research with participants from various geographic and demographic areas.

Furthermore, this research's interpretive nature was validated and triangulated by the participants, but still can leave room for error from the researchers.

Implications for the higher education community. The original research findings (Perry, 2012) suggested the post-university transition can be difficult for recent graduates. There are practices that institutions can implement to help prepare students to confront this transition and support them if and when needed. The students' beliefs that the interview process was therapeutic and helped them adjust during this time of transition could indicate the type of services institutions of higher education offer to graduates. Participants specifically expressed the benefits they received from the guided reflection of the research interviews, thus indicating possible institutional staff services to students as they leave the academic setting. These services may include assisting graduates with career planning, general emotional support and coping skills, and practical life skills. If students are supported and well-equipped for this transition, presumably, they will be better prepared to face other life transitions and obstacles, which further aligns with mental health counseling.

Implications for future qualitative interview studies. By studying the research as a therapy process, qualitative interviewers can create methods of interviewing that foster more meaningful experiences for participants, which generates a greater body of results to interpret. This study's findings align with previous literature and indicate that ensuring positive rapport allows participants to feel more comfortable and share more meaningful narratives. This suggests that incorporating counseling styles into research interviews may benefit both researchers and participants. Following more research on this topic could lead to creating interview theories that will help qualitative studies.

Implications for the counseling community. This research could potentially lead to collaboration among the research and counseling communities. Counseling styles can positively influence new interviewing techniques. In turn, this budding research could be used to inform the counseling sector of new ways of performing initial client interviews as the therapeutic relationship is being built. This could also be a resource for counselors to provide their clients, especially regarding the young adult and university population. Participating in this type of research could give clients an added therapeutic benefit. The counseling community could be asked to provide training for research interviewers or be consultants during qualitative data collection.

We know from this exploration of the 'research as therapy' process that qualitative interviews can provide participants with a therapeutic experience. This is congruent with previous literature identifying this as a benefit of the reflective nature of qualitative interviews. There are implications not only for future interview studies but for higher education and counseling communities as well. The need for future research is clear; however, research as a therapy serves as a starting point in discussing the benefits of qualitative interviewing on both participants and the research.

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