An Exploration of Trainee Counselling Psychologists’ Experiences of Undertaking a Doctoral Thesis in the United Kingdom

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DCounsPsych) in the Faculty of Humanities

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Sabita Santira Kesu

School of Environment, Education and Development
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An Exploration of Trainee Counselling Psychologists’ Experiences of Undertaking a Doctoral Thesis in the United Kingdom

Sabita Santira Kesu

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Abstract

Background and objectives: A thesis is a requirement of the doctoral counselling psychology programme and plays an important role in forming an identity as a trainee counselling psychologist. While extensive research exists for doctorate experiences in general, less is known about the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a thesis in the United Kingdom. The rationale behind this study is therefore to explore how trainee counselling psychologists perceive and make meaning of their experiences and how they go about writing their doctoral thesis. Method and analysis: A qualitative design was employed to answer the research question. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with twenty trainee counselling psychologists who were either starting to write their thesis or at the stage of almost completing it. A grounded theory analysis was used in this study, which aims to generate a theory based on categories that have been discovered from the data. Several strategies were employed in this study to demonstrate the rigour and trustworthiness in a qualitative design. Findings: The results of this study show that two categories emerged from the data: (1) obstacles in completing a thesis and (2) positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis. The theory that emerged from this study shows that trainee counselling psychologists have both positive and negative experiences which appear to fluctuate during the process of undertaking a thesis and vary from person to person due to individual circumstances. It is vital not to envisage a dichotomy between the positive and negative experiences, which form a natural and necessary journey for all doctoral students. Conclusions: The trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a thesis can be viewed as an emotional and multifaceted journey. Overall, the shared experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis was a valuable contribution to this study. The paper discusses avenues for further research alongside some practical recommendations that might be useful for trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis.
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Acknowledgment

The journey to the completion of my doctoral thesis has followed a long and winding path, with many stops along the way. I have doubted myself on numerous occasions and lost my confidence countless times, getting writer’s block, stuck, and feeling disheartened. Many have questioned whether I would complete but they don’t understand the enormity of undertaking a doctoral thesis. The common question posed was: “When are you going to finish?” I hated this question, but I was good at changing the conversation, a technique I developed at various stages of writing my thesis. My journey has been so convoluted that I cannot find the words to describe it, but I feel I have not been alone. I would like to thank all of those who believed in me and encouraged me to complete this thesis. All of you have made it an unforgettable experience.

It has been a stressful but, most importantly, a meaningful process which involved support and lots of encouragement from others. A “thank you” seems hardly enough to express my gratitude to the special people who accompanied me on this journey. First and foremost, I wish to thank my main supervisor, Dr Terry Hanley. As a novice researcher I faced many challenges, thank you for encouraging my study and allowing me to grow as a researcher. You have been a tremendous support for me and your humour has guided me through my stormier creative moments. I must also thank my second supervisor, Dr Laura Winter, who was always willing to help and give her best suggestions, even at the eleventh hour.

I wish to thank the following people who held my hand throughout this journey of writing the thesis. Stratos Lekkas, my best friend from my days at Keele University and fellow procrastinator, I appreciate your professional input and responding to my ideas, all the way from Greece. I would like to give a special thanks to John Armitage, who tried to educate me to be more English, but I failed miserably. However, I flourished in the drinking culture of having a drink for any occasion! I admire your incredible dedication, patience and the ability to hang in there, which caused many days of gratitude. Jimmy Newson you have always been there for me and have been my special friend, at times. A big thank you for offering your time and support when I know you are very busy. I appreciate you for organizing my thesis and stopping things from falling apart. My fellow trainee counselling psychologist and friend, Lorie, who has shared this journey with me. I consider you as a gift to me and I would not wish to replace you with anyone. To my parents and two brothers we
have all tolerated each other, with love, laughter, anger and hate but we survived beautifully.
I love you all deeply.

Ribuan Terima Kasih
Chapter 1: Introduction

“I can still remember the strong smell of coffee while staring at the blank screen of my laptop. I have been struggling for almost two hours but my mind won’t do me a favour and come up with a single word; instead, the staring goes on and on... It’s not that there are no thoughts drifting through my mind, it’s that nothing seems good enough to be put onto paper. I wonder what is happening to me! Not an easy question to answer and my anxiety is growing as this cup of coffee is about to finish. I wish I had a magic pill, like the pills that the guy took in the movie called ‘Limitless’, where he managed to write his book in a single night. Imagine if I could write my thesis in a single night! My cup drops with a jerking move of my hand and I come out from my brief trance to realise that in my world there are no such magic pills. These pestering thoughts come back again... Do others feel like this or am I the only one who feels so stuck?” (Extract from the personal journal).

1.1 Personal interest in the topic

This excerpt from my personal journal was one of the most representative moments of my initial endeavours to write my doctoral thesis. It expresses the struggle I went through and my constant wish that things would be easier. Of course, even before undertaking this thesis, my general sense was that every doctoral student experiences difficult moments while producing a thesis. However, I wanted to hear these experiences and have my assumptions confirmed, instead of just assuming that everybody thought exactly like I did. I wanted to share these experiences instead of keeping them isolated. I needed to explore whether my notion could be shared and supported by other trainee counselling psychologists. I wanted to extend my thoughts and curiosity about how others might experience the process of undertaking a thesis. Thus I decided on a thesis about the process of writing a thesis.

My interest in this area grew out of my experience of undertaking a dissertation for my MSc in Counselling Psychology. During my MSc studies I felt very isolated and I struggled to complete my dissertation in time. I procrastinated because of a lack of confidence in academic writing. Furthermore, these problems were exacerbated by the fact I am a foreign student and English is not my first language. In all likelihood, if someone had been able to hear and connect with my experience of loneliness and stress while sharing their own similar experience, it would have been very helpful. Another significant reason for my choice of topic is that, as a trainee counselling psychologist, I have a passion for helping people and supporting clients on an emotional level. This led me to consider the availability of support for trainee counselling psychologists undertaking their thesis. There is a strong support network in the practice component of the course, but there is not much support for writing a thesis (Wright, 2003). Knowing that undertaking a doctoral thesis can be demanding, this is a crucial consideration.
The dissemination of knowledge has been an additional motivation for my choice of topic. Instead of keeping the experiences to myself, I decided to share them with other students writing a doctoral thesis, because undertaking a thesis is the most extensive way of discovering and sharing new knowledge (Gordon, 2003). As a person-centred counsellor and now a trainee counselling psychologist, I am keen to look at the subject of immediacy or, as Rogers (1942) suggests, the here and now. In my experience, this is the process of focusing the client on the present moment and this is an important foundation for my clinical practice. There is a parallel to this in the way I view my research. For example, currently I am undertaking a doctoral thesis about writing a doctoral thesis, which suggests an emphasis on the “here and now” in my research, as well as my practice.

1.2 Aims and objectives of the thesis
The rationale behind this study is to explore how trainee counselling psychologists perceive and make meaning of their experiences and how they go about writing their doctoral thesis. McLeod (2003) points out that, while research is essential, speaking out about the experiences involved in the research process is also vital. This is because discovering the experiences of other trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis may create a space for learning and reflection about the research process. Without this discourse they may not know if their experiences are shared by others. Furthermore, this study aims to understand the variety of experiences of trainee counselling psychologists. This hopefully will contribute to further research and to ways of supporting these students. It is hoped that this study will be helpful to trainee counselling psychologists, giving them access to experiences of other trainees.

1.3 Background and introduction to the study
In this section I will be covering the following areas that pertain to my study. The first includes the nature of counselling psychology and the movement in the United Kingdom. The next looks at the definition of a professional doctoral degree and counselling psychology as a professional doctoral programme. Finally, I will be looking specifically at the trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom and the process of undertaking a doctoral thesis.
The nature of counselling psychology

The British Psychological Society (BPS) provides this definition:

*Counselling Psychology is a branch of applied professional psychology. It has its origins in the United Kingdom within the humanistic movement with influences from counselling psychology in the USA and European Psychotherapy on the one hand and the science of psychology (cognitive, developmental and social) on the other. Counselling psychologists work with people in a variety of settings from severe and enduring mental health services to those whom life has challenged and who are struggling to adapt to these changes. The focus is on working with an individually tailored psychological formulation of an individual’s difficulties to improve psychological functioning and well-being (BPS, 2008)*.

Counselling psychology starts from a humanistic philosophical basis that values the client’s subjective experience, behaviour and how they constructs meaning (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). With this kind of theoretical basis, it is clear that counselling psychology emphasises the importance of being sensitive towards the experience and values of the client (Gillon, 2007). Counselling emerged as a distinct field in the 1940s (McLeod, 2009). Carl Rogers, one of its main proponents, publicly came out against the medical model, which focuses on diagnosis and the use of medication. Rogers rejected the idea that only medical professionals could practice “psychotherapy” by deploying instead his own term of “counselling and psychotherapy” (Rogers, 1942). As noted above, previously mentioned humanistic values are at the core of counselling psychology (Hansen, 2007) because, as a profession, it aims to improve the wellbeing of clients (Lichtenberg et al., 2008; Romano & Hage, 2000). This stands in marked contrast to the medical model. In keeping humanistic values at its core, counselling psychology has expanded to incorporate issues of social justice, diversity (Sue, 2001) and advocacy, which organically integrate into the profession (Speight & Vera, 2008).
Movement in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, counselling psychology had a difficult inception as prevailing attitudes favoured the medical model during the early twentieth century. According to Orlans and Scoyoc (2008), the development of counselling psychology can be seen below:

- The British Psychological Society, formerly known as the Psychological Society, was founded in 1901 at University College London.
- The first voluntary counselling agency to be established was the marriage guidance council (now called Relate) in 1938.
- The first university counselling service was initiated at Keele in 1963.
- Following this, the Association of Student Counsellors was formed in 1970.
- Meanwhile, there was a development in the area of career counselling, which was offered in schools and work places.
- A section for counselling psychology was established by the BPS in 1982. This marked the formal inception of the profession of counselling psychology.
- This section started with a small membership consisting of only 225. Later, by 1989 it had already formed into a special-interest group and by 1992 its membership had grown to 1,208.
- The first award that was established by the BPS was the Diploma in Counselling Psychology, created in 1992 (Sherrard, 1993).
- Finally, in 1994 counselling psychology was recognised officially as a profession. The twelve-year struggle enabled the BPS to establish itself as a division and gain full professional status (Woolfe et al., 2010).

Many therapeutic approaches are used in the United Kingdom. This is evident from the growth of more than 450 different types of approaches in therapy (McLeod, 2007). This diversity of approaches is currently being used to treat a variety of issues such as depression, stress, phobias, eating disorders, bereavement, sexuality, abuse and trauma. The major approaches in use are cognitive behavioural, person-centred and psychodynamic therapy. The United Kingdom government in 2010 announced the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) initiative, which aimed to make evidence-based
psychological therapies more accessible within the NHS, due to their proven effectiveness (NICE, 2011).

**Definition of a professional doctoral degree**

The combination of research and practice can be seen in the degree title awarded to counselling psychologists, that of a “professional doctorate”. The term doctorate is derived from the Latin word ‘docere’, which means to teach. The full Latin term is ‘licentia docendi’, which means “teaching license”; it was first established in medieval Europe as a license to teach at a medical university, however its origins can be traced back to the early church when the term doctor was used to refer to church authorities who taught and interpreted the bible (Verger, 1999). The education system in the United Kingdom offers postgraduate degrees which include different levels such as Masters degrees, either taught or by research, doctoral and PhD degrees. Currently the doctoral degree is viewed as the highest academic qualification a university can award (Tinker & Jackson, 2004). The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the QAA (2008), defines the guidelines for doctoral study. It aims to standardise practice over different doctoral programmes by outlining what is expected from a doctoral graduate.

Broadly speaking, doctoral programmes can be divided into two categories: research doctorates and professional doctorates (Miller, 2010). A research doctorate is also known as a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy); in PhD a research project is done independently under the guidance of a supervisor, whereas professional doctorates generally follow a programme of study during professional training (Smith et al., 2010). There are numerous fields of study that have professional doctorates covering diverse areas, for example law, education, business and dentistry. Most professional doctorates are granted by British universities; they aim to tailor the doctoral experience to the demands of that particular profession (Miller, 2010). So, for instance, the counselling psychology doctorate programme provides rigorous clinical practice and research skills at a doctoral level.
Counselling psychology offers education to the highest level, providing professional, practice-based doctoral degrees. A doctorate in counselling psychology offers a supervised research project and contains a taught element course combining lectures, seminars, workshops and professional practice. Although the doctoral counselling psychology programme is considered to be new in the United Kingdom, this programme is available internationally. While American universities offered doctoral courses in counselling psychology as early as 1946 (University of Minnesota), it wasn’t until 1994 that the first professional doctorate programme in counselling psychology was initiated in the United Kingdom, at the University of Surrey.

There are several universities in the United Kingdom that offer training for a doctoral level in counselling psychology. Some of the doctorate programmes in counselling psychology are offered at:

- Teesside University (Accredited -2002)
- University of Wolverhampton (Accredited- 2004)
- University of the East London (Accredited-2004)
- London Metropolitan University (Accredited- 2004)
- City University London (Accredited -2005)
- Glasgow Caledonian University (Accredited - 2007)
- University of Strathclyde (Accredited - 2007)
- University of Manchester (Accredited - 2010)

All trainee counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom are required to join a doctoral-level training programme approved by the HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council), which sets out guidelines for maintaining high standards of education and training, and continuing good practice. They further need to acquire a graduate basis for chartered membership (GBC). These requirements will differ for trainee counselling psychologists in other countries.
Trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom

Trainee counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom are required to complete a doctoral thesis and to integrate the scientist-practitioner model. The rigorous process that trainee counselling psychologists go through requires a high degree of commitment. This is due to the fact that trainees must integrate theory, research and practice. The scientist-practitioner model was originally adopted in the discipline of clinical psychology but is now also a key component of counselling psychology training (Richardson, 2009; Vespia & Sauer, 2006). The model suggests that students and professionals in counselling psychology must integrate both research and practice, where each must constantly inform the other (Myers, 2007).

As a profession, counselling psychology straddles the research and practice divide, so discussions about the fit of the scientist-practitioner model within everyday therapeutic practice regularly occur (e.g., Blair, 2010). Although trainee counselling psychologists rely on this model, such an agenda can prove complex and provides a substantial hurdle for trainees to overcome, most notably with more practice-focused trainees often seeing little relevance in undertaking research. Some trainee counselling psychologists have experienced challenges in integrating these two different components, while others find it a useful model. One point that supports the former of these two positions was expressed by Richardson (2009), who proposed that the scientist-practitioner model is rarely implemented properly because a gap exists between practice and research. To further support this, Albee (2000) suggested that the skills involved in research are incompatible with those used in counselling psychology.

Undertaking a doctoral thesis

The doctoral thesis, or ‘dissertation’ as it is called in US institutions, is regarded by many as the most important part of the doctoral programme. It is the last station on a long journey for doctoral students to acquire their degrees. In counselling psychology, for instance, the British Psychological Society states that it is a requirement for all psychology doctoral students to complete a thesis, in order to gain experience and training in all areas of academic research (BPS, 2000). All doctoral counselling psychology students must submit an original thesis with substantial contributions to the field of study, however this may vary depending on the institution or the country.

According to University of Manchester guidelines, the normal length of a thesis, inclusive of notes, bibliography and appendices, has been determined to be between forty and fifty
thousand words and in the English language. The student has to ensure readability by using a suitable font size, such as Times New Roman or Arial, and appropriate spacing, such as 1.5 or 2. The paper has to be an A4 size. Along with the written component, a candidate is assessed through a viva, in which the examiner will determine whether the candidate can be awarded a doctorate. The format of the thesis may differ, depending on the university and the country.

In the United Kingdom, doctoral assessments can involve both a thesis and a viva, however there are other formats depending on the nature of the course, university and country. For examples, a PhD thesis is generally longer than a doctoral thesis and there are other professional doctorates in which the length and the format differ. The course structure can vary depending on the subject and institution. A doctorate can apply to an academic or a professional degree in a variety of fields. A PhD course involves mainly research and teaching, whereas a professional doctorate requires a practice based component, and the length of the final assessment will vary from that of a traditional PhD (QAA, 2008). These standard requirements provide a framework for different doctorates depending on the university and the country.

The process of doing a thesis can be highly demanding. Lennie and West (2010) suggest that one reason for this is that a lot of key decisions are made at the beginning of the thesis. Etherington (2000) further states that many trials, such as the complexity of roles and the high level of personal challenges, are involved in undertaking a doctoral thesis. Despite the challenging process, undertaking a doctoral thesis can be a positive experience and very rewarding, offering personal satisfaction and the ability to pursue an academic career if so desired (Leonard et al., 2005). These various perceptions may be interpreted differently by individuals undertaking a thesis in other countries.

1.4 Overview of the thesis
This thesis is divided into five chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion and conclusion. Chapter One provides an overview of the thesis. This chapter introduces the research topic and contextualises the study by justifying its aims and how it contributes to the profession. Chapter Two places the study in the context of existing literature, with the aim of presenting a theoretical framework pertaining to the research question. It illustrates a synthesis of empirical literature and justifies how the
present study addresses the gap therein. Chapter Three describes and justifies the methodology used for this study. It explains the philosophical position and it provides a rationale for the research design, sample, data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study, which lead to the formulation of a grounded theory and discusses the findings with regard to the study’s research question, literature review and theoretical framework; it provides an analysis of the results. It also includes a methodological discussion which looks at the strengths, the weaknesses and the implications of the study. Chapter Five delves into a brief overview of the study and includes recommendations for future research. This final section narrates the researcher’s reflection on the study.

1.5 Chapter summary
In this chapter, I introduced the research topic by beginning with an extract from my personal journal. I provided my personal interest in the topic followed by the aims and objective of the thesis. Next, I provided a background and introduction to the study which includes the nature of counselling psychology and the movement in the United Kingdom. This was followed by the definition of a professional doctoral degree and counselling psychology as a professional doctoral programme. Finally, I looked specifically at the trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom and the process of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Overall, this chapter outlines the overview of the structure of the thesis.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter examines the present research project in the relevant theoretical and research literature. The literature review involved a multifaceted search of databases over the course of my three-year Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. Apart from citations, the main components have been searched by electronic databases of journal articles. The following sources used to search for articles were limited to: PsycInfo, ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts), CINAHL Plus (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature), Google Scholar and Medline. Additional sources have been found through searching in published books in the relevant subject areas, as well as searching the reference lists of identified sources. This study focuses upon the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis and the literature review follows a similar trajectory. However, it is necessary to acknowledge here that because of a lack in relevant studies concerning the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom, I considered it appropriate for this literature review to cover the experiences of doctoral students in general, including PhD and Professional Doctorate students. The review will include international literature from North America, Australia and Europe that is relevant to the experiences of doctoral students undertaking a thesis and how it applies to trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a thesis.

Here is a summary of the points that will be discussed in detail:

- Firstly, I will present the literature pertaining to the structure of a professional doctorate, and what distinguishes professional doctorate from a traditional PhD.
- Secondly, I will be looking at the conceptual research framework within the doctoral study and I will discuss what is involved in conducting a research and writing a doctoral thesis, together with the essential role of the supervisor.
- Thirdly, I will explore the reasons for undertaking a doctoral thesis and examine the attitudes of the doctoral students undertaking a doctoral thesis.
- The fourth area that I will explore is the experiences of doctoral students undertaking a doctoral thesis, followed by the internal and external challenges encountered. I will also provide an account of the positive experiences of doctoral students, as demonstrated by the literature. I will discuss studies pertaining to the experiences of doctoral students undertaking a thesis from various professions or areas, this will include PhD students in psychology.
Finally, I will be covering the area towards becoming a counselling psychologist and I will be exploring the crucial aspect of trainee counselling psychologists in research training followed by trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis.

2.1 Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

Counselling psychology is a relatively new branch in the area of applied professional psychology, with the Division of Counselling Psychology in the UK being incorporated in the British Psychological Society in 1982. The professional doctorate in counselling psychology in the United Kingdom focuses on three aspects: theory, research & practice and personal development. With this in mind, it encourages trainees to integrate and cultivate all these three aspects in order to develop themselves into efficient counselling psychologists. A practitioner doctorate or a work-based doctorate (Lester, 2004) is also known as a third-generation doctorate (Boud & Tennant, 2006). The Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology is an applied professional training programme designed to provide a doctoral level education leading to a professional qualification. The programme is accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and approved by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The programme offers rigorous training in both research and clinical practice. Together with the taught modules, trainee counselling psychologists are assessed through a written thesis.

This thesis has to be an original document to the level of a doctorate standard, which usually consists of 40,000 to 50,000 words, presented in a way which will provide a new contribution to the field of counselling psychology. Writing the thesis lies at the centre of doctoral education. The British Psychological Society states that it is a requirement for all psychology doctoral students to complete a thesis, in order that they might hope to gain experience and training in all areas of academic research (BPS, 2000). While undertaking a thesis, the doctoral student goes through different stages which can vary according to the structure of the university’s programme and from country to country.

Primarily a trainee counselling psychologist has to write an extensive thesis and submit it at the end of the third year. It begins with writing a proposal which involves choosing a topic, developing a research question and planning the research. After this stage each trainee has to submit a proposal for their research and gain ethical approval. Once approval has been given, the student must then obtain informed consent, confidentiality and secured storage.
before proceeding with their data collection. Following the data collection the results are analysed and the main stage of writing the thesis commences.

Once the thesis is completed and approved, all trainee counselling psychologists must go through a viva. The viva examination requires the candidate to answer or justify any questions relevant to their work. According to the Quality Assurance Agency (2012), all doctoral students in the UK should have a minimum of two supervisors to help and guide them with the process of writing their thesis. Both supervisors should be experienced or one could be a novice supervisor with at least a formal training. PhD and doctorate students are concerned with the academic aspects such as making practical research decisions in various stages including selecting a feasible topic, methodology and data-related choices with the guidance of the supervisor (Dunleavy, 2003; Graves & Varma, 1997; Pearson & Ford, 1997; Phillips & Pugh, 2000; Trigwell et al., 1997).

What distinguishes a Professional Doctorate from a traditional PhD?

It is essential to know the differences between a PhD and a professional doctorate because the two programmes vary for different subjects. The individual’s choice should be based on their aims or their area of interest in a particular field. Traditionally, a PhD is the most common form of a doctorate. The title PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) has roots in the Greek language meaning “Teacher of Philosophy”, originally awarded in the philosophy discipline. However, today, it is possible to be awarded a PhD in a variety of fields. The awarding of a PhD significantly depends on a research project where the student is guided by an assigned supervisor who ensures the completion of a thesis typically between 80,000-100,000 words (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008). The programme usually lasts three years but this time can vary depending on the student’s progress, the institution and the country.

A professional doctorate differs from a traditional PhD in that the doctoral programme has a “taught” component where the student is required to meet the aims of modules. A professional doctorate is awarded after successful completion of the “taught” component and also a research project. The project is similar to a PhD thesis in that it is also supervised but it is often around 50,000 words. Some doctoral programmes present in a different format; for example, they must publish a series of papers. The format may vary depending on the institution and the country. The doctoral programme is more work-oriented and there is often
a required practical component. Professional doctorates are often completed to gain qualifications in specific areas such as law, medicine and psychology where a professional path is followed as opposed to a research path in a PhD (Park, 2007).
2.2 A conceptual research framework within the doctoral study

A conceptual research framework is essential and must be embedded in an academic doctoral study. This is because it enhances the perspective of multiple theoretical frameworks which creates new knowledge and therefore conceptualises the basic foundation of a doctoral study (Major, 2010). The conceptual research framework should be intended as a starting point for reflection about the research and its design. This will assist the researcher to develop awareness in understanding research ideas. Developing a theoretical framework is necessary because it ensures the research will flow in a logical and systematic manner. To further support this, Maxwell and Loomis (2003) have emphasised “the role of the conceptual framework in defining the theory or theories relevant to the study; the conceptual framework is the basis for reframing the research questions and for formulating hypotheses or making informal tentative predictions about the possible outcomes of the study” (Maxwell & Loomis, 2003, p.253). Conceptual thinking can be defined as "working with words and ideas in terms of their connections and relationships" (Gredler & Shields, 2008, p.75). Trochim (2006) argues that there are two territories in research; theory and observation. He explains theory as the thought processes of the researcher, whilst observation is what occurs in the real world where data is collected. Simon (2011) explains that a good theory or set of theories can guide all aspects of the study from choosing the research question to completing the thesis. Therefore, the theoretical framework provides a structure which helps the researcher during the process.

Conceptual frameworks have been proven to be imperative to students in the evaluation of their research and an important factor in a quality study (Shields & Tajalli, 2006). This makes the research being studied credible as the thesis is informed by theory and empirical findings. Kiley (2009) and Kiley and Wisker (2009) state the importance of the combination of conceptual frameworks and students’ own thought processes. It has been found that an understanding of essential concepts can lead to a more structured foundation which guides the research student through the process of completing a thesis. Evidence to support this can be found in the discussion of ‘the idea of a framework upon, or within which the research is based’ (Kiley, 2009, p.436).
Conducting a research and writing a doctoral thesis

Before conducting a research and writing a thesis it will be useful to understand the meaning of research. According to Singh (2006), the term ‘research’ consists of two words, “Re” + “Search”. He further explains that ‘Re’ means again and again and ‘Search’ means to find out something. One premise that any researcher must challenge is the acceptance of existing scientific dogmata or paradigms (Kuhn, 1962). Having established the conceptual framework and the meaning of research we are in a position to examine the stages in a research process. There are many different guidelines and various stages that may determine the direction of the research process. From the initial planning to searching, discovery, reflection, synthesis, revision and learning, these are stages or processes that a doctoral student may undergo while completing a thesis. The research process can be seen below:

![Research Process Diagram](image)

Figure 1: The inspiration for the research process model image above was the reflective model (Edwards & Bruce, 2006).

The research process is not easy and before starting it one must plan carefully and be sure about the research problem or question. The supervisor plays a fundamental role both in guiding the stages of the research and with the preparation for the viva examination (De Levay, 2013). For many novice researchers the research process can be overwhelming due to the complexity of the research methods adopted in conducting a scientific research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). A common mistake that many novice researchers make is that they may jump or rush too quickly to a solution before they have given a problem adequate thought or before they even have a well-defined problem established (Luse et al., 2012).
Another misconception that novice researchers face is selecting a research topic without considering other aspects of the research process. In contrast, Ellis and Levy (2009) suggest that a researcher must consider other issues such as the objective of the study, the relevant literature and the availability of data. This is seldom an easy task because a large amount of literature needs to be reviewed and the stages of the research process require a lot of critical work and evaluation (see Creswell, 2003; Hart, 1998, 2001; Lester & Lester, 2006; Ridley, 2008; Rudestam & Newton, 2001).

It is important to distinguish between conducting a research and writing up a thesis as they involve two separate processes. Writing is crucial for doctoral students as it reflects a deeper level of engaging research and knowledge (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). There is a growing literature that focuses on the area of research and theory in academic writing among doctoral students, however relatively few studies explain how doctoral students actually learn research writing (Boud & Lee, 2009). Aitchison et al. (2012) found that doctoral writing is emotional work because doctoral candidates reported mixed feeling of joy and frustration while writing their thesis. It could be argued that the hardest part is the writing aspect, as it involves producing a substantial body of work and that it requires constant dedication. Owler (2010) suggests that the process of writing a thesis differs amongst individuals and despite being described as a demanding process, it is also seen as a rewarding one. At times the writing process can involve a further complication whereby doctoral students have to comprehend theories and translate them into academic writing but become stuck (Wisker & Savin-Baden, 2009). Interestingly, Kiley (2009) found that when doctoral students had passed through the stage of being stuck, an improved attitude towards writing in academics emerged. This indicates that while writing has been perceived as difficult, some doctoral students may find this process enjoyable and fulfilling. Also, writing is a continuous process that enables one to improve and progress, so this could be encouraging for doctoral students to continue and feel more satisfied in their writing skills.

Now that I have discussed the process of conducting a research and writing a thesis, both of which rely heavily on the involvement of the supervisor, I will consider the role of supervision that facilitates the doctoral student to complete the thesis. Several studies have acknowledged the integral role of the supervisor (see Rudd, 1975; Delamont & Eggleston, 1983; Salmon ,1992; Pole et al., 1994; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000;Green, 2005; Lee & Green, 2009; Manathunga, 2012). Therefore it is evident that the relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student is crucial to successful completion of the doctoral thesis. The relationship entails a considerable amount of involvement; Mhunpiew (2013) likens it
interestingly to a marriage, as it involves a range of mixed emotions such as happiness, frustration, sadness and many more.

The supervisor can take on many different roles including teacher, coach and facilitator. The way in which the supervisor conforms to these roles determines the strength of the alliance or relationship between the two (Robertson, 2009). Hockey (1996a) points out that successful supervision depends on the nature of the relationship and the personal attributes of the supervisor, such as compassion, empathy and approachability, in addition to their academic expertise. He further states (1996b) that the supervisor should have an understanding of their responsibility and the individual needs of the student. This is therefore critical in order for an effective supervision to take place. Alongside this, a study done by Muszynski and Akamatsu (1991) stressed that finding a cooperative and helpful supervisor can help doctoral students complete their thesis in less time than if they had an unhelpful one. Similarly, Kluever (1997) states that when doctoral students have regular contact with their supervisor and easy access to university facilities, the completion of the thesis is facilitated considerably.

On the other hand, an ineffective supervisory relationship can have an adverse effect on the completion of the doctoral thesis. For instance, Appel and Dahlgren (2003) reported that some doctoral students were compelled to change supervisor due to a lack of accessibility or to recurring conflicts. In this study, a high percentage of participants criticised conflict management by supervisors. Some of the specific complaints participants made were that conflicts were covered up and not properly discussed. Furthermore, students complained about unspoken conflicts and the presence of unwritten rules, which create a culture where students are unsure about how to act. Likewise, Pyhalto et al. (2012) directly addressed the issue of lack of supervision and its negative impact on producing a thesis. The study raised shocking examples of academic misconduct, such as sexual discrimination, threats, verbal abuse and violations of research ethics. These misconducts linked into broader issues surrounding the politics of academic departments. Worryingly, a number of extreme cases emerged from the findings, such as cases of blackmail, threats and even sexual harassment.

A lack of supervision and guidance can lead students to feel confused and for them to lack a sense of direction, which further leads to feelings of stress, loneliness and isolation.
2.3 Reasons for undertaking a doctoral thesis

Before delving into the experiences of doctoral students, and what the literature can contribute, it would be useful to discuss what initially motivates people to acquire a doctoral degree. This may be useful as by being aware if the motivation behind undertaking a doctoral thesis determines whether a candidate will successfully complete their thesis. For example, if a doctoral student is passionate about research this will result in a continuous progress in their thesis compared to someone who has a lack of interest in research. Little study has been done looking at the motivation of doctoral students, with the majority focusing on the traditional PhD paths (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Initially, when the PhD programme was first established in UK institutions, the focus was for candidates to prepare for a career in academics (Blume & Amsterdamska, 1987). In the 20th century, the nature of the PhD programme changed as job opportunities in the academic sector were dwindling. The course developed to include more technical aspects which would prepare students for careers in other professions (ABRC, 1996). Nowadays, the majority of doctoral students do not pursue careers in academia but instead are employed in other fields (UK GRAD, 2004). This shows the new opportunities that a professional doctorate can provide, as opposed to the traditional route of a career in research.

There have been previous studies into the reasons for undertaking a doctoral thesis and what motivates students to continue and complete the programme (see Becher et al., 1994; Hockey, 1994; Delamont et al., 2000; Pole, 2000; Scott et al., 2004). For instance, Scott et al. (2004) carried out a study in the United Kingdom focusing on professional doctorates in different fields. This study was unique as it examined professional doctorates and not PhD students. In this study, the researchers investigated the motivations behind students’ decisions to undertake a professional doctorate and how this has an effect on them individually. They came to distinguish three categories: people who were at the beginning of their careers, people who were somewhat established and people who were well established in their jobs. “Professional initiation” was the main motivation for people in the first category, who regarded the programme as a means of sparking their careers, “professional continuation” in the second category, which concerned people who felt the need of undertaking a doctorate so that they would boost their already promising careers and “personal fulfilment” in the third category, who chose to begin a doctoral programme mainly because they wanted to feel intellectually challenged. It has to be made clear, though, that
these findings had to do with people’s expectations and not what the professional doctorate eventually realised.

Another interesting study that looked at professional doctorates in the United States was the study by Mujtaba et al. (2007). The study provided an extensive account of reasons why doctoral students chose to pursue a doctorate study. Some participants expressed that what motivated them to undertake the programme was the joy one experienced when enhancing oneself intellectually. This also contributed a feeling of self-fulfilment and bettering oneself professionally. One participant described his reasons for joining the doctoral programme were to fulfil his thirst for knowledge to acquire a higher status in education. Another student commented that his reasons for undertaking a doctoral study were due to a need for personal satisfaction and intellectual development. He cited these motivations as fundamental in opening up new opportunities later on in life with respect to his future wealth, career and networking. It was found that external factors such as finance, familial support and time also could be influential on the decision to undertake the programme. In line with this, intellectual stimulation, which according to Prabhakar (2005) can be defined as creating and adopting new ways to approach conventional methods, is another motivation to pursue a doctorate. This way of thinking encourages researchers to look at problems from a different perspective and engages them to inspire the innovation of others in approaching challenges in new ways.

Professional doctorates that emphasise the integration of research and practice can not only be seen in counselling psychology but also in other professional doctorates. For example, a study done by Wellington & Sikes (2006) examined why students choose a professional doctorate and what impact it has on their personal and professional lives. The study recruited 29 participants who were doctoral candidates in the United Kingdom. It was determined that there was a multitude of reasons for the participants wanting to complete a doctoral study. Some of the reasons include a ‘need’ for theory and a deeper understanding as to how it applies in practice, although some participants reported feelings of frustration towards the practice component. Further reasons were the influence of life events in individuals, the appeal of being intellectually challenged and various external factors. There is a parallel process in counselling psychology whereby trainees reported having the need to integrate research and practice and the challenges involved (Horn et al., 2007).

Furthermore, Leonard et al. (2005) carried out a study into what motivated students to undertake the doctoral thesis. Two of the prominent themes are a specific interest in the
chosen field and to expand intellectual horizons. What motivates those individuals is the opportunity for self-fulfilment and even the chance to take on a new challenge. Professional development was deemed important as some students are required to undertake further studies in their career paths and others are keen to expand their research skills and enter the field in their respective subjects. There are some students who had previously completed a Master’s degree and viewed the doctoral degree as a follow on to their previous research. It is essential to look at the reasons behind pursuing a doctoral study as these can affect the overall experience of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Therefore, not having a clear motivation for pursuing the degree can lead to stress, anxiety and frustration and even lead to further complications such as failure or withdrawal from the programme (Pole, 2000).

There is a clear need to understand the reasons or motives behind undertaking a doctoral thesis, however the expectations and attitude of the doctoral students play a vital role in determining the outcome of the thesis. Miller (1995) proposed an interesting theory pertaining to doctoral students’ attitudes and maintained they generally divide into three types: (1) Direct current which consists of doctoral students that maintain a continuous level of effort throughout which results in a rapid completion of a thesis. (2) Alternating current which consists of doctoral students that begin the thesis process with a high level of effort which then gradually fluctuates between high and low which may cause delay. (3) Weak battery which consists of doctoral students that appear to be consistent in their thesis but the effort gradually diminishes and requires outside intervention. This theory can be useful for doctoral students to identify their attitudes towards writing and may help them progress.

Recent research (Gibbs, 2010; Trowler; 2010; Bekhradnia, 2013) conducted quantitative studies using surveys to understand doctoral students’ experiences of learning. It was reported that the attitude and behaviour of the doctoral students determine the success in completion of the doctoral thesis. In North America a study conducted by Kuh (2003) investigated the concepts of engagement of doctoral students. The study found that the amount of time the student dedicates to research correlates to the level of success. Alongside this the success is also influenced by the supervisor and the faculty. Other studies found similar results (see Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Ewell & Jones, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The doctoral student’s attitude to and perception of writing a thesis can fluctuate, as it is affected by the progress of writing the thesis and the attitude of the supervisor (Barnes, 2010; Gardner, 2008).
2.4. The experiences of doctoral students undertaking a thesis

In this section, I will endeavour to cover the various experiences of doctorate and PhD students in general, based on findings from relevant literature resources. The experience of undertaking a doctoral thesis can be acknowledged worldwide as a challenging endeavour but very little literature looks at the positive perspective towards undertaking a doctoral thesis (Burkard et al., 2013). This shows that the obstacles or challenges of undertaking a doctoral thesis are more prominent in the literature compared to the positive experiences, possibly because there is a general sense or perception among doctoral students that undertaking a doctoral thesis is difficult. However, the literature indicates that the majority of studies that look at the positive experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis are concerned with PhD and doctorate students and are situated in a growing international literature. A more balanced view of the positive and negative experiences would be preferable.

The literature indicates that the majority of studies that look at the experiences of undertaking a thesis are concerned with PhD and doctorate students and are situated in a growing international literature (see Barnes & Austin, 2009; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Sweitzer, 2009). The majority of the studies focused on completion rates across disciplines (see Kearns et al., 2008; Manathunga, 2005; Rudd, 1986; Wright & Cochrane, 2000), supervision (Nelson & Friedlander, 2001; Wright, 2003), attrition (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000), and peer support (Manathunga, 2005; Gardner, 2009). Further research is needed within the counselling psychology programmes to understand the experiences which trainee counselling psychologists undergo, and make meaning of, as they go about writing their doctoral theses. Some of these experiences do not surface but remain as ‘untold stories’ (McAlpine et al., 2012, p. 511).

Since undertaking a thesis can be seen as a personal journey and the experience can vary between individuals, it can be said that it requires dedication and passion on an individual level (Phipps et al., 2007). Golde (2000, p.199) identified doctoral students as “the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students”. There is a body of literature which describes the experiences of doctoral or PhD students and most of the studies conducted are quantitative in nature (Silvester, 2011). There is little systematic exploration focusing solely on the individual experience of completing a thesis; however, there is evidence which examines the dynamics of the relationship between students and their supervisor. These studies have given
considerable attention to the role of the supervisor (e.g., Kam, 1997; Mainhard et al., 2009; Pole et al., 2010), supervisor development (e.g., Manathunga, 2005; Pearson & Brew, 2002) and promotion of excellent supervision (e.g., Nulty et al., 2009). Parallel to this, there has been acknowledgement on the importance of the research community (Pearson, 1996). The vast number of studies done on supervision shows how crucial supervisors are in helping doctoral students to complete their thesis.

There is a growing amount of research that focuses on the more positive and unique experiences of PhD education (see Lee & Williams, 1999; McCormack, 2004; Barnacle, 2005; Green, 2005; Leonard et al., 2005; McCormack, 2005). For instance, Dinham and Scott (1999) carried out a study on doctoral experiences and explored the voices of those actually involved in the doctoral process. In this study, it was found that support from peers and family was essential in creating a positive experience. Furthermore, the study concluded that students experience a wide range of positive and negative feelings. Emphasis was placed on the importance of the “wholeperson (p.110)” along with the general doctoral experience in order to successfully undergo the process of completing a thesis. McCormack (2005) found that completing a thesis can be viewed from different perspectives according to each student. Interestingly, one of the participants in the study breaks the negative stereotype that is often associated with completing a thesis by expressing positive feelings about the process.

In line with this, Gardner (2009) and Turner and McAlpine (2011) give a broad outlook on the experiences of doctoral students undertaking a thesis. It was reported that some expressed feelings of excitement, pleasure and a sense of emotional engagement and creativity. A similar study by Mowbray and Halse (2010) shows that doctoral students feel joy and delight in writing a doctoral thesis and found it a life-transforming experience. In point of fact, these are quite striking findings compared to the challenges and struggles doctoral students experience while undertaking a thesis. From the studies, there is no simple viewpoint as to which emotions are felt when undertaking a thesis. One cannot claim that it is always a negative experience nor can one claim it is a consistently positive experience (Rodwell & Neumann, 2008). The process is often mixed and varies from student to student often incorporating a wide range of these emotions which depend on a variety of internal and external factors. The growing amount of literature in the area of positive experiences may be valuable for doctoral students as it gives a different outlook from the stereotypical perception of undertaking a doctoral thesis.
2.5 The challenges of undertaking a doctoral thesis

In this section I will be focusing on some of the challenges and difficulties that doctoral students encounter while completing a doctoral thesis. These will be examined separately as internal and external challenges, due to the differences in their nature and what was found in the literature review.

Internal challenges

The internal challenges in completing a thesis may involve selecting a topic, choosing design and method, availability of data, considering the epistemology, engaging with theory and interpreting theoretical frameworks in the literature review, contribution to knowledge, writing the thesis, and finally facing the viva examination. These challenges may vary depending on the institution and the country. Lovitts (2001) explained the complexity of completing a thesis:

“These are complex processes with which most students have little familiarity or prior experience. Students who reach this stage know (or discover) that they must conduct research that distinguishes them from their peers. Most feel inadequately prepared to do this type of research and find themselves unprepared for the writing in the style required for a dissertation (p. 72)”.

Doctoral students have to partake in an intense journey “from the moment you type your first word to when you walk into the viva voce examination to defend the completed work” (Oliver, 2004, p.3). Earlier research has shown doctoral students face some challenges including difficulty in writing, problems with university guidelines, confusion in conducting a research and preparing for the viva (see Schaufeli et al., 2002; Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The effects of this intense journey, for some doctoral students, can lead to a mixture of feelings such as uncertainty, anxiety and lack of direction. A study, entitled ‘navigating in unknown waters’, notes that "at the beginning of the dissertation research process doctoral students cannot see the end, nor can they imagine how they will get there" (Bench et al., 2002, p.289). An interesting quote that sums this up is a doctoral student’s description of their experience as a “rollercoaster of confidence and emotions” (Christie et al., 2008, p.225). Freud (1958) wrote that anxiety involved preparation in anticipation of a perhaps unknown, yet disruptive event. For instance, a doctoral candidate can experience anxiety when faced with new challenges. These can include doubts about their choice of research question, using new methods or even due to being a novice to the overall research
experience. Therefore, it is implied that the process of undertaking a thesis can be unpredictable and one can experience a range of emotions.

The next area that can be a challenge is the choice of methodology, a key ingredient to a good quality research. The major components of research are ontology, epistemology, methodology and method. For many doctoral students the methodology, epistemology and ontology development of the research is an overwhelming process (Wisker & Robinson, 2008). The methodology section involves selecting a topic, framing the research question and considering the objective and purpose of the thesis. Later, an appropriate research paradigm and theoretical perspective are constructed to form a research design. This process is not necessarily linear and involves a number of methodological decisions which are informed by the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

For instance, Rudestam and Newton (2007) confirm that the data analysis can be scary for many students and may result in students feeling uncertain about how to proceed in the research process. A valuable study that shows us the problems that data collection can generate was carried out by Abdullah-Teo (2013) who examined the experiences of young people in relation to their academic study. She reported that, whilst it was very exciting to hear what the participants had to say, her enthusiasm subsided when faced with the perplexing task of analysing the overwhelming amount of data. Porter (2013) also remarked on the challenging nature of the data analysis, with regards to the framing of the data after the collection, as the students run the risk of collecting material that is either too broad or too specific. It is essential to systematically organise the data in order to analyse it effectively. Several studies explore threshold concepts and provide useful ways to help doctoral candidates develop in the research process (Land et al., 2008; Meyer & Land, 2006).

A further internal challenge, which is a fundamental element of the doctoral programme, is the writing of the thesis which can be seen as a difficult academic task and may cause delay in completing the thesis (see Kurther, 1999; Lee & Aitchison, 2009; Johnson et al., 2000; Wellington, 2010). Surprisingly, there is very little literature that gives attention to the process of academic writing (e.g., Bartlett & Mercer, 2001; Delamont et al., 1997). The writing process is not always straightforward, yet too often doctoral writing is treated as separate from and ancillary to the real work of research (Murray & Moore, 2006). According to the French philosopher, Blanchot (1989), the process of writing is personal as it is closely related to the researcher’s own subjective experience. He also described the isolation that is experienced during this time and how this can hinder the process.
The overwhelming feelings that one can go through being immersed in the writing can often lead to feeling lost in the process of writing a thesis (Owler, 2010). For instance, doctoral candidates can struggle to find a balance between being engaged in their research and devoting enough time to the actual writing task in regards to deadlines and quality of work. It is not unusual for students to become consumed in their research and, because of this, become withdrawn from other aspects of life. Being stuck or experiencing writing block is a common experience in doing a doctorate or a PhD, which often manifests as a difficulty in academic writing (Wisker & Savin-Baden, 2009).

The final hurdle for doctoral candidates is the viva examination. Several researches have examined aspects of the viva examination, such as its aim and its structure, but very little research looks at the area of how doctoral students understand or make meaning of the viva experiences (see Baldacchino, 1995; Hartley & Fox, 2002, 2004; Hartley & Jory, 2000; Jackson & Tinkler, 2001; Park, 2003; Trafford, 2003; Trafford & Leshem, 2002; Wallace, 2002; Wallace & Marsh, 2001). One of the notable studies done by Tinkler and Jackson (2004) explored the responses of thirty doctoral students before and after taking the viva examination and compared their experiences, anticipation and expectation of the viva examination. The viva examination involves only the candidate and two examiners; however this can vary depending on the structure of the programme and university policies (see Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Jackson & Tinkler, 2000). In the United Kingdom, a viva examination is usually restricted to those involved, candidate and examiners. However, there are some institutions that offer public vivas, although these are normally reserved for academics in a particular field (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001).

The purpose of the viva is to test whether the doctoral candidate is informed about their research and whether they are a deserved receiver of the doctoral qualification (Remenyi et al., 2003). However, the process of the viva is perceived as unpredictable and difficult to prepare for, but it was found that mock viva practice was a useful experience for candidates (Leonard et al., 2006). Furthermore, Trafford and Lesham (2002) carried out a study on doctoral candidates who found the viva exams to be a positive experience and concluded that a candidate’s performance in the viva depends on the academic quality of the thesis, the confidence of the candidate and the interaction between the examiners and the candidate. This study is valuable to enable doctoral students to view their viva examination in a more positive light. It shows the candidate the necessity to be well versed in the content of the thesis as this could be the best way to prepare for the viva examination.
External challenges

The external challenges will be focusing on the outside or outer part that doctoral students might face while trying to complete a thesis. These external issues may focus on the environment, family or psychological issues. Recent research in the literature into the challenges of doctoral experience has shown major evidence of isolation, procrastination, stress, lack of experiences and family responsibility, however there are other external factors such as personal issues, lack of motivation and unexpected circumstances that may cause hindrance towards the completion of the doctoral thesis (Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

A number of researchers have pointed out that isolation is one of the most frequent issues that doctoral or PhD students face (see Bess, 1978; Thoits, 1986; Hockey, 1994; Ali & Kohun, 2005; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Isolation is often internalised and not expressed openly (Ali & Kohun, 2006) and can occur at different stages of completing a doctoral thesis and can be manifested according to individual circumstances, nature of the institution and supervisory relationship. Kohun and Ali (2005) conducted a study investigating the feelings of isolation amongst doctoral students which found several reasons that may trigger these feelings. One of these is the academic pressure and a lack of understanding of the requirements of the programme. For example, a student can become overwhelmed and this, along with the fear of academic failure, can bring about feelings of loneliness. Problems with communication can be the second reason behind this, with specific issues being a lack of, or simply misleading, communication between the supervisor and the student. For instance, a lack of regular contact and limited access to the supervisor can lead to students feeling unsupported in the process.

The feeling of isolation among doctoral students is a major factor that contributes to the high attrition rate at doctoral programmes (Ali & Kohun, 2006). In spite of this recognition, the feeling of isolation has yet to be addressed fully in the design of some doctoral programmes. In other words, most programmes do not include specific design features that help to handle this feeling among matriculated students (Bess, 1978; Hawlery, 2003; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

In line with this, Delamont et al. (2004) justified the isolation theme by saying that as the students have taken the decision to become experts in a specific research, they are expected to be isolated in order to become fully focused on their endeavour. Furthermore, they stated that this intellectual isolation didn’t have to be accompanied with social isolation.
Interestingly, Abdullah-Teo (2013) found that intellectual isolation is more serious than social isolation due to having chosen the Theory of Activity by Leontiev (1978), an “exotic” methodological approach. Due to the challenging methodology selected, she experienced intellectual isolation where she did not have anyone to turn to, receive support or ideas from. Several studies touched on issues of loneliness and isolation and this theme reflects some of the major challenges experienced by doctoral students while completing a thesis (Muszynski & Akamatsu, 1991; Kluever, 1997; Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Pyhalto et al., 2012; Burkard et al., 2013). For instance, this theme is touched upon by Muszynski and Akamatsu (1991) who found that students staying on campus can feel lonely, especially during holidays, because of their distance from family members. This finding is supported by Kluever (1997) whose study emphasises the important role family and friends have in providing emotional support for doctoral students completing their thesis. In a similar vein, Appel and Dahlgren (2003) quoted one participant’s account of often being alone and not receiving any supervision as feeling ‘invisible’. Furthermore, other participants described feeling alienated and expressed a feeling of non-belonging. I chose two quotes to illustrate the experiences of two participants in the study of Burkard et al., (2013, p.14): “The dissertation process became increasingly frustrating and it did not help me see what I needed to do, I felt lost”; “I felt sad all the time, like there was a cloud hanging over me”. This clearly indicates that social isolation can be a hindrance for doctoral students to complete their thesis.

Moreover, there is also evidence that stress, which can be triggered by a variety of causes, has been identified as a major obstacle in completing a doctoral thesis (see Glassner, 1979; Toews et al., 1993; Pyhalto et al., 2012; El-Ghoroury, et al., 2012). An earlier study conducted by Katz and Hartnett (1976) listed four main problems frequently associated with doctoral education: (a) students are not provided with enough information about the programmes (b) students face intellectual isolation and face stress from a variety of triggers (c) students expect a balanced life-style and, finally, (d) students do not feel they are overseen by an adequate supervisor. Although this study was conducted several years ago, its findings can certainly be applied to the current doctoral or PhD students.

Collinson (2005) carried out a qualitative research into the subjective experiences of professional doctorate students in art and design in the United Kingdom. The study produced fascinating narratives detailing the struggle and transformational journey of professional doctoral students. In conjunction with this, Gardner (2009) examined doctoral students’ rate of attrition. This study involved sixty students and thirty-four faculty members from an
institution in the United States. It aimed to investigate the cultural factors that can affect the completion of a thesis. The study discovered three main themes: a) stress b) uncertainty and c) personal issues. Besides, a study done by Pyhalto et al. (2009) found that the correlation between dissatisfaction with the learning environment, stress, exhaustion and anxiety were some of the challenges experienced by doctoral students.

There appears to be a general agreement on four studies (see Kluever, 1997; Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Pyhalto et al., 2012; Burkard et al., 2013). These studies indicated that stress was a significant problem for doctoral students producing a thesis. For instance, in Kluever (1997) it is clear that stress is a major obstacle, as it was acutely experienced during the process of completing a thesis. Some of the specific challenges were choosing a topic, locating the participants, managing a schedule and finally presenting to the panel. Interestingly, Appel and Dahlgren (2003) found that stress is a significant factor for both male and female doctoral students, although there are notable differences in their experience of it. For example, women in particular suffered from higher levels of stress and mental fatigue in general.

Pyhalto et al. (2012) echo these findings in their studies by emphasising doctoral candidates’ high level of stress during the process of producing a thesis. They highlight the negative impact stress can have and its potential to lead doctoral students to attrition. They further elaborate that stress is often caused by financial difficulties, inability to manage workload, perceived high frequency of evaluation and a deficiency in academic writing skills. Furthermore, it was found that those students who had considered withdrawing from their studies had higher levels of stress and anxiety than those who had not considered withdrawing. The significance of the theme of stress is further supported by Burkard et al. (2013) where some students described negative emotions like, for example, a vast sense of stress and trauma. Indeed, finding out that stress was a major hindrance was expected. This is maybe due to a doctorate course being demanding, challenging and time-consuming.

In regards to counselling psychology, Kumary & Baker (2008) conducted a study on the stress level of trainee counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom. It was reported that high levels of stress occurred in the practice aspects as opposed to the research element, but there was no mention of stress occurring in the completion of a thesis. This study can be helpful for trainee counselling psychologists, especially for trainees in the first year to manage their stress level and identify the areas that might be challenges to reduce stress.
Furthermore, Denicolo and Pope (1994) outlined the multiple roles and responsibilities a student must assume in order to complete their research. It was found that some students had trouble in balancing the different elements. This balance is imperative in the study of counselling psychology due to the integration of theory, research, practice and other external roles. Failure to achieve this balance can increase stress levels and feelings of anxiety, which may lead to other problems such as procrastination and self-sabotaging behaviours.

A number of researchers have also pointed out that procrastination is a major hindrance of completing a doctoral thesis (see Ellis & Knaus, 1977; Micek, 1982; Wegner, 1986; O’Brien, 2002; Potts, 1987; Day et al., 2000; Haycock, 1993; Onwuegbuzie, 2000; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984; Pullen, 2003; Stogner, 2003; Morelli, 2008). Muszynski and Akamatsu (1991) found that procrastination is a major problem that doctoral students encounter while producing a thesis. The study further elaborates that cognitive and affective factors lead students to procrastinate. These factors include perfectionist tendencies, low frustration tolerance, a high need for autonomy, a high need for approval and fear of failure. The quotation below describes how one participant felt about procrastination (Muszynski & Akamatsu, 1991, p.120):

“I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to reach the goals I set for myself.”

Alternatively, Kearns et al. (2008) carried out a study that looked at the obstacles of meeting deadlines of a thesis. It was determined that students exhibited self-sabotaging behaviours such as procrastination and perfectionism. For example, a perfectionist doctoral candidate may experience feelings of self-doubt and a lack of faith in themselves to complete the task or even lead them to wonder if their work is at the standard they wish it to be. This fear could lead them to avoid doing the work altogether or spend too much time on irrelevant stages of the process. There is much research (see Beck et al., 2000; Alexander & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Deniz et al., 2009) to support the idea that if procrastination is not tackled early, then it can quite easily become chronic as the more you procrastinate the more your workload and stress will increase and then fuel the procrastination. This vicious circle of procrastination can lead to an attempt to finish the thesis in a very short amount of time, which will impact negatively upon the quality of the work.

Several studies have identified obstacles, such as uncertainty, fear, poor guidance and lack of experience that may affect novice researchers, however very little is known about these aspects (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Ellis & Leny, 2008). Due to the rigorous training of the
It was found that novice researchers often struggle or feel confused and this in particular happens in the first year of the programme (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Moreover, Douglas (2013) suggested that when novice researchers face difficulties, it can be due to several reasons. One of them is lack of experience and another could be an underlying weakness in the design of the methodology research. A dilemma of this kind is very difficult for a new researcher to resolve. One of the main challenges that a doctoral student may face is the ambiguity not only in their academic course, but also in their chosen career path. Academic achievement is often accompanied by feelings of doubt and uncertainty in regards to future prospects (e.g., Gluszynski & Peters, 2005). This appears to be a common feeling among doctoral students, especially for novice researchers, and it is vital to get guidance and support.

The final non-academic challenge that will be explored concerns family responsibility, professional role and personal issues. A growing literature shows that doctoral students completing a thesis may not only have academic challenges but also those that affect their professional and personal lives (see Powel & Dean, 1986; Dinham & Scott, 1999; Golde, 2000; Maher et al., 2004; Manfield et al., 2010). For example, Smith et al. (2006) found that relationship and responsibility within work and family life or financial consideration were major challenges to completing a doctoral thesis. These challenges can be unpredictable as can other unexpected circumstances which may lead to other problems such as stress, time management, fatigue and lack of motivation.

A recent study done by Hwang et al. (2015) carried out a mixed method design on how doctoral students perceived barriers that slow the progress towards completing a doctoral dissertation. It was reported that a high level of non-academic issues was found, mainly in the area of family, employment, social and medical obligations. Thus the area of family responsibility and professional role has a significant influence in the process of completing a doctoral thesis. Research into the challenges of doctoral students have revealed that the combination of the internal and external challenges to completing a thesis can be a significant factor in the attrition rate of doctoral students or the failure to complete their thesis (see Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Jiranek, 2010; Kim & Otts, 2010; Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012; Lott et al., 2010). In spite of this, researchers like Hughes & Kleist (2005), Kirby et al. (2004), McDermott (2002) and Piercy et al. (2005) revealed that doctoral students that face these challenges may experience a transition involving the fluctuation of positive experiences such as self-confidence, satisfaction and a range of emotions. All these
studies clearly reflect that family responsibility is not easy to balance as it sometimes can be unpredictable and doctoral students must be cautious in managing their time.

2.6. Positive experiences and opportunities of undertaking a doctoral thesis

In the previous section I explored the challenges involved in completing a doctoral thesis and it will be useful to explore the positive experiences. Numerous researchers (see Byars, 2005; Golden et al., 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Kirby et al., 2004; McDermott, 2002; Piercy et al., 2005) suggest that doctoral students can gain positive experiences, such as joy, pleasure and fulfilment, while completing a doctoral thesis. It is evident that undertaking a doctoral thesis does not only involve negative experiences but can be seen as an enjoyable process for doctoral students. Generally, acceptance onto a doctoral programme provides them with a sense of personal assurance and achievement and gives hope for future prospects (Golden et al., 2005). A relatively small number of researchers have been investigating the positive motivation of doctoral students and the benefits they have gained by undertaking a doctoral thesis (see Becher et al., 1994; Hockey, 1994; Delamont et al., 2000; Pole, 2000; Scott et al., 2004).

A qualitative study done by Pole (2000) looked at the reflections of doctoral students and tried to capture students’ perceptions on their positive experiences of completing a doctoral study. It was found that students who had accomplished their doctoral education, or who were close to gaining a doctoral title, were more positive about the experiences and overall value of the course. It has been suggested that as the course progresses and the end result is in sight, there is a sense of achievement and completion felt that surpasses the negative aspects previously experienced. An Australian study by Harman (2002) states that overall satisfaction with the course has a significant effect on the successful completion of the programme. He found that factors such as effective supervision, organisation of the course, supportive peers and quality of training considerably improve the experience of the student and therefore their ability to be consistent throughout the programme. A more recent study carried out by Leonard et al. (2006) found that students still responded positively when questioned about the value of the programme. This research opposes the general stereotype of the doctoral programme and its difficulties. The overall feeling of the participants was that pursuing the doctoral degree had been worthwhile. To sum up, the study found that the majority would be happy to go through the process once more.
Publication also appears to be the most visible opportunity and is increasingly expected for doctoral students (Raddon, 2011). Many doctoral students appear to see publication as a great opportunity for employment, career advancement and research employment (Pitcher, 2010). Recently, a research culture on an international level has developed in order to encourage doctoral degree programmes for publication (e.g., Powell, 2004; European University Association, 2005). In light of the positive experiences, further studies should explore the positive aspects and place more emphasis on the advantages of undertaking a doctoral thesis and to encourage students to overcome threshold concepts (Wisker, 2010) because undertaking a doctoral thesis is a demanding and rigorous task.

2.7. Towards becoming a counselling psychologist

Training to be a counselling psychologist can be exciting but, at the same time, it requires a lot of commitment and can be very challenging. The trainees experience a unique form of training that involves research, theory, practice and personal development. In order to attain a Chartered Counselling Psychologist status a trainee must first achieve a Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership of the British Psychological Society (BPS). Next a trainee is required to complete three years full time, or part-time equivalent, postgraduate training in doctorate counselling psychology or a qualification in counselling psychology accredited by the BPS. All doctorate training counselling psychology programmes in the United Kingdom are assessed to a doctoral standard. These courses are designed to provide professional, clinical and academic competencies as identified by the British Psychological Society (2009) and Health and Care Professions Council (2008).

The doctorate in counselling psychology involves rigorous training both in practice and research. The practice aspect involves training in more than two models of psychological therapy which emphasise the importance of the therapeutic relationship together with ethical and professional considerations. Whereas the research aspect involves training in research method and skills, and the ability to evaluate research and to produce a thesis. Overall, the programme shapes the personal, professional and academic aspect of the trainee counselling psychologist with the guidance of the supervisor in both practice and research. Walsh et al. (2004) recommend that trainee counselling psychologists are expected to develop a critical understanding in both theory and research as it has implications for practice.
Trainee counselling psychologists in research training

Trainee counselling psychologists are expected to develop their capacities for research and of critical engagement to generate and evaluate evidence in research. In the research dimension trainees are expected to be able to demonstrate the following (HCPC, 2008): 1) Develop the knowledge of research evidence and how it impacts clinical practice 2) Understand the variety of research designs and be able to critically analyse published research relevant to counselling psychology 3) Develop the ability to devise research questions and design and conduct a research project 4) Develop the ability to reflect as a researcher. Counselling psychology provides diverse empirical counselling psychology research training (see Gelso, 1979; Crotty, 1998; Borkovec, 2004; Boisvert & Faust, 2006).

The diverse empirical studies done in research training show that research is crucial and plays a prominent role in counselling psychology. For instance, a study done by Moran (2011) looked at the attitudes of trainee counselling psychologists towards research training and it was found that most trainees preferred the practice component but expressed uncertainty towards research and unhelpful emotions were identified, however some trainees changed to a more positive attitude later. This clearly shows that trainee counselling psychologists may experience mixed feelings, either positive or negative, towards research. Interestingly, even though negative emotions were identified towards research and later positive attitudes were experienced among trainee counselling psychologists, this may indicate that trainees are more prone to practice and possibly less interested in research.

In counselling psychology the scientist-practitioner model has been introduced to shape the identity of trainee counselling psychologists. The scientist-practitioner model was originally adopted in the discipline of clinical psychology but is now a key component to counselling psychology training (Richardson, 2009). The scientist-practitioner model suggests that trainees must integrate research into practice and vice versa. For example, one recommendation is for trainee counselling psychologists to familiarise themselves with practice based evidence (Lowman, 2012). In the field of clinical psychology there has been a flourishing history of empirical research; this is evident across a number of domains such as diagnosis, assessment, psychotherapy and experimental psychopathology (Routh, 1994; Routh & DeRubies, 1998). This varied agenda of components is a substantial hurdle for trainees to overcome when trying to simultaneously integrate both the research and practice components. Yet, despite these challenges and difficulties, the scientist-practitioner model is considered very important for the future of counselling psychology. Additionally, Kasket
(2011) suggests that trainee counselling psychologists may not comprehend fully the research component, which may cause a challenge in forming a clear understanding of their role. She further explains that trainees are not well prepared for the research element of the thesis. For example, when starting they don’t realise that research is a compulsory component and as the course progresses the research element becomes yet more frightening.

**Trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis**

In counselling psychology there is a diverse amount of literature surrounding research training and many researchers have looked at the area of conducting a research and how research is drawn into practice (see McLeod, 2000; Darlington & Scott, 2002; Borkovec, 2004; Kasket & Rodriguez, 2011). However, very little is known about the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. Lennie & West (2010) reflected on the dilemmas novice researchers face in counselling psychology research. Some of the challenges faced were choosing a methodological design, lack of training, supervisory relationship and planning the research process. This study offers a practical approach in dealing with these challenges. Overall the study focused on the challenges faced through being a novice and their viewpoint as a researcher.

Sweitzer (2009) explores some of the challenges of professional doctoral students pertaining to three elements that include student, researcher and practitioner. It was found that many trainees experience ambiguity and uncertainty in their identity. Similarly, in counselling psychology a qualitative design was conducted by Gazzola et al. (2011) on professional identity among counselling psychology doctoral students and the study revealed a tension impacting on their professional identity. The study identified fostering and hindrance categories that impacted on their professional identity. Some of the fostering categories are providing services to clients, giving and receiving supervision and role model while the hindrance categories included sense of disillusionment, disappointment and internal conflicts.

A noteworthy study in the United Kingdom was by Etherington (2005), who investigated the experiences of PhD counselling students and issues that were prevalent during their journey towards becoming reflective researchers. This study also looked at different areas such as candidates’ relationship with their supervisor, challenges in looking for suitable research topics, reflexivity in research writing and addressing methodological concerns. This study is unique as it is enriched with the researcher’s personal experiences as a PhD student and her view on reflexivity. The students acknowledged the problems in the above
mentioned areas during the process of completing a PhD; it was found that they had difficulties mostly with ethical issues and reflexivity in research writing. Still, the study concluded that PhD students found reflexivity in research writing useful. This study would be valuable for trainee counselling psychologists or novice researchers because reflective writing is necessary in a doctoral thesis.

Two studies have been conducted in the United States. Willis (2008) carried out a qualitative study of the attrition rates amongst doctorate counselling students. Under this study face-to-face and telephone interviews were carried out among eight participants. The participants were interviewed about their experiences and views on the doctoral attrition in the area of counselling education. The findings revealed that there were two distinct reasons for attrition. In one group, they struggled to complete a doctorate because of challenges in family dynamics, relationship issues with the thesis chair and future employment. These external factors compelled them to drop out, contrary to their own wish to continue. As a result of this, they experienced a series of negative feelings such as irritation, disappointment, frustration and depression. In the second group, they chose to leave because they re-evaluated their personal objectives during their doctoral study. Having made their choice to leave, they experienced positive feelings such as relief, closure and peace. This clearly shows that doctorate counselling psychology students face both positive and negative experiences while completing the doctorate course, which tells us that the programme can be demanding as well as rewarding.

The second American study carried out by Golden et al. (2005) investigated the experiences, hopes and expectations of doctorate counselling students. One of the themes that emerged from the study was that participating in the programme had allowed the students to gain a sense of approval from their respective family members. Feelings mentioned were pride, achievement and acceptance of their doctorate. Despite the positive experiences reported in the study, it was found that students were struggling with time management, balancing work, financial difficulties and family commitments. This study is useful for doctorate students to consider the positive and negative experiences before or during the doctorate programme in order to alleviate challenging situations. A primary research study in the United Kingdom was conducted by Silvester (2011), using a qualitative design. This study involved six doctorate counselling students, four of whom participated in an interview process and the remaining two submitted written accounts of their experiences in the Professional Doctorate in Counselling (DCouns). The study generated themes in the area of personal development, expectations, passion and voice.
This study shows that doctorate students can enjoy the opportunity to complete a doctoral thesis with positive thinking, and not have an assumption that undertaking a doctoral thesis only involves negative experiences. Furthermore, Kasket & Rodriguez (2011) explored the identity crisis in training counselling research and discovered that trainees felt incompetent in producing doctoral-level research. This study further suggested ways of ensuring trainees, supervisors and examiners avoid mistakes and achieve high quality research. This study could be valuable for current and future trainee counselling psychologists to explore their identity as a researcher.

2.8 Conclusion

Due to the scarcity of literature, concerning the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in particular, the review of the relevant literature delineated a broader area. In a wider sense, the literature indicates undertaking a doctoral thesis can be demanding and yet rewarding and the literature demonstrates the experiences of doctoral students undertaking a doctoral thesis are numerous and range from positive to negative. Consequently, the journey can often involve a complex range of emotions with doctoral students experiencing emotional highs and lows. It is these emotions that determine the perspectives of the students, with a mixture of positive and negative reports on the overall experience. On the other hand, counselling psychology shows a prolific theoretical and conceptual literature in the area of research training in counselling psychology but rarely involves the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. Furthermore, it can be argued that whilst the review indicates literature providing a detailed and pragmatic view on research, nothing was identified concerning the experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. With reference to trainee counselling psychologists, it is important to recognise their different thoughts and feelings in order to identify their various experiences associated with this degree, as it is a programme with a specific structure where students are required to fulfil certain components with the thesis being an integral part. The findings show that further exploration is crucial to developing an understanding of the process of undertaking a doctoral thesis for trainee counselling psychologists. This identifies a substantial gap in the literature which this study may begin to address and perhaps future studies should also explore the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking
their doctoral thesis. The methodology design adopted for this study will be addressed in the following chapter.

2.9 Chapter summary

The chapter summarises the current state of knowledge by addressing the relevant literature. It consists of four main areas that are covered based on relevant theoretical and research literature. The first area that was discussed was the structure of a professional doctorate and what distinguishes professional doctorate from a traditional PhD. The second area that was covered was a conceptual framework of research within the doctoral study and I discussed what is involved in conducting a research and writing a doctoral thesis, together with the essential role of the supervisor. The third area explored the reasons for undertaking a doctoral thesis and examined the attitudes of the doctoral students undertaking a doctoral thesis. The fourth area that was discussed was the experiences of doctoral students undertaking a doctoral thesis, followed by the internal and external challenges encountered. I also provided an account of the positive experiences of doctoral students, as demonstrated by the literature. I discussed studies pertaining to the experiences of doctoral students undertaking a thesis from various professions or areas, this included PhD students in psychology. Finally, I covered the area towards becoming a counselling psychologist and I explored the crucial aspect of trainee counselling psychologists in research training, followed by trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. The findings from this review revealed a lack of significant extant literature concerning the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis; these experiences were the aim that this study was designed to explore. Overall, this chapter identifies the research gap, which justifies the need for this study.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter introduces the research design and methodology used for this study and how it has guided data collection, analysis and the development of theory. Firstly, an outline of my epistemological position as a researcher will be presented. Following this, I will be looking at the actual methodology in a detailed manner which will include discussion on the recruitment, data collection, data analysis and procedures involved. Finally, I will discuss the ethical issues considered in the research process.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the aim of the present thesis was to explore the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the voices and experiences of trainee counselling psychologists, the research question that was used was What are the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists when undertaking a doctoral thesis?. The following three sub-questions guided the research question and are listed below:

1. What challenges do trainee counselling psychologists encounter when undertaking a doctoral thesis?
2. What opportunities do trainee counselling psychologists see in undertaking a doctoral thesis?
3. How do trainee counselling psychologists view their research or doctoral thesis impacting their practice?

A qualitative method design was used to answer the research question and was considered best suited for this purpose (Creswell, 2007). A qualitative design requires that the researcher “centers on the attempt to achieve a sense of the meaning that others give to their own situation” (Smith, 2005, p. 12). In carrying out this research in a qualitative manner, three focus groups were set up with the intention to explore the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. To answer the qualitative research question, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with individuals who were either starting to write their thesis or at the stage of almost completing it. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I will be expanding on each stage of my methodology below.
Research objectives

The main objective of this study was to explore the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. Below I have listed several aims that pertain to this study:

- To identify and describe how trainee counselling psychologists perceive and make meaning of the process of undertaking a doctoral thesis.
- To capture and have an understanding of a range of individual experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis.
- To contribute to further research and, hopefully, make recommendations for supporting trainee counselling psychologists.
- To provide strategies and resources enabling trainee counselling psychologists to relate their experiences to those of others.

3.1 Epistemological positioning

This section describes the way I think as a researcher and the epistemological and ontological commitments I make in my research. To do this, we should first define our terms. Epistemology refers to "how people know what they know, including assumptions about the nature of knowledge and reality" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 213). It helps answer the question “how do I know what is true?” (Cope, 2002, p. 43) as well as formulating an approach to looking at how individuals understand and perceive the world around them. Ontology, on the other hand, is concerned with what exists and the ultimate nature of reality (Maxwell, 2008). Ontology can be defined as the study of “claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other” (Grix, 2004, p. 59). In short, we can say that ontology seeks to discover what we mean when we say something exists.

Before delving into the analysis of my methodology, it is necessary to acknowledge that not all qualitative researchers share the same epistemological assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Even though there is some flexibility in relation to our choice of methods, a researcher’s epistemological and methodological commitments constrain the adoption of a particular method. Morse (2002, p.296) described one of the principal epistemological concerns that researchers face as “theory phobia” which is a feeling of avoidance and a lack of confidence in researching. As I was a novice researcher, I experienced this “phobia”.
However, by overcoming this personal challenge, I was able to grow and develop as a researcher. Doing this allowed me to choose an appropriate research method for my study with greater clarity towards the aims and objectives of the study.

In attempting to reflect on the way I understand ontology, epistemology and methodological decision making, I would like to illustrate my understanding through a diagram. This diagram represents the relationship between epistemology, methodology and data collection (Figure 2).

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 2: The relationship between epistemology, methodology and data collection (Carter & Little, 2007).**

This diagram clearly demonstrates how epistemology modifies methodology and justifies the original knowledge being produced. It shows that a researcher starts from an epistemological position which in turn influences the methodology they will choose. This then leads on to the data collection and the data analysis which, combined with the original epistemological position, justifies and evaluates that data, producing knowledge. This diagram shows the interconnections in the process of research design which enabled me to understand my own values and commitments as a researcher.

In defining my epistemology, I examined my previous experiences, assumptions and expectations around undertaking a thesis. I found that the experience of undertaking my thesis was a challenging process. I was having problems with stress, time management and procrastination. Therefore, as I was struggling to write my thesis, my intention was to find people who shared similar or closely related experiences to mine. I was looking for
supporters in my struggle because I needed to feel I was not alone. Therefore, my initial epistemological stance was positivism. A positivist epistemology posits that the world is structured according to universal laws, and everything that happens can be understood according to these laws (Hughes, 2001). The basic underlying key point for the positivist paradigm starts with an assumption that the truth is out there. So, in a nutshell, positivism in concerned with “uncovering truth and presenting it by empirical means” (Henning, Rensburg & Smith, 2004, p.17). Undertaking a doctoral thesis is a compulsory element for professional doctorate students and, consequently, there is a large proportion of qualified counselling psychologists who have completed the component. Therefore undertaking a doctoral thesis is perceived as a requirement of being a professional. The universal truth here is that it is manageable or doable and the evidence for this can be found in the fact that so many people across the world have completed it.

However, as I began my exploration, I took a different direction and began to question whether there is only one way to view things or one common perspective that can apply to everybody. In this sense I became unsure whether there is a universal truth or reality. More specifically, while I conducted my focus groups, I realised that positivism is not well adapted to exploring the diverse perspectives, views and interactions of participants as we can only make sense of these things contextually (Andrews et al., 2005). Moreover, I wondered how the other trainees perceive and make meaning of their experiences while writing their thesis. I gradually realised that the positivist claim, namely that there is one objective reality experienced in the same way by everyone, was not what I believed. Instead, I came to believe that there are multiple ways of constructing and interpreting reality, which has led me to adopt a constructivist epistemological position. As Maxwell (2011) states, constructivism refers to “the position that our understanding of reality is a social construction, not an objective truth, and that there exist ‘multiple realities’ associated with different groups and perspectives.” Therefore, my intention became to explore these “multiple realities” and see how other people’s experiences differed from mine.

This does not mean that the constructivist position led me to accept the notion of “anything goes”, rather that I simply moved away from the belief that there is one objective truth and towards a more inclusive position where different experiences were equally valid. The question is what triggered my awareness towards a constructivist epistemology. My counselling training programme emphasised pluralism as a core foundational concept. The idea that there are multiple versions of truth that exist simultaneously is referred to as local truth (Cooper & Mcleod, 2011). I became more aware that my version of reality regarding
this topic could in fact be different from other views. I became aware of the differences between my subjective experience and that of others. While I understood this on a tacit level, as I am a qualified therapist and it is a part of our job to have this understanding, this was the first time I applied this concept to my training as a counselling psychologist. Therefore the training programme is another contributing factor to my shift from positivism to constructivism.

The following reasons are why I rejected a quantitative method; a quantitative study would be completely inappropriate for a constructivist epistemology because the statistical nature of the research design excludes narrative accounts of individual experiences and perspectives. This, thus, also excludes a mixed method approach because of the quantitative element within it. The most appropriate approach for a constructivist epistemology is a qualitative approach as it is multi-dimensional as compared to the one-dimensional nature of the quantitative approach (Bazeley, 2004). According to Charmaz (2000), the qualitative method allows us to explore experiences from the perspective of those who are living them, which appeals to constructivist researchers.

I would now like to talk about data collection and how it interacts with methodology and epistemology. The qualitative design allows several ways of collecting data, such as one-to-one interviews, focus groups, or observation. As a constructivist I am interested in hearing a plurality of different experiences but, furthermore, I wish to capture the interaction and dialogue between different perspectives. My epistemological commitment was further validated through my decision to conduct focus groups, as I realised that a positivist approach would not be well adapted to exploring the diverse perspectives, views and interactions of participants and how these things only make sense contextually (Andrews et al., 2005). Finally, I would like to discuss how my data analysis has been influenced by my epistemological and methodological choices. There are a number of philosophical debates surrounding the nature of grounded theory. There are different opinions on the epistemological commitments of grounded theory. On the one hand, Charmaz (2006) considers grounded theory to be constructivist, while by contrast Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider it to be a form of naturalistic enquiry. Since the aim of constructivist inquiry is to interpret research participant’s meanings, which are themselves interpretations and produce a substantive theory (Charmaz, 2006) or as Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest a working hypothesis. My commitment to constructivism and exploring people’s multiple realities naturally led me to choose a qualitative research design, as it allowed me to focus on the multiple personal experiences of participants.
3.2 Research method

“A research method is a strategy of enquiry which moves from the underlying philosophical assumption to the research design and data collection” (Myers & Avison, 2002, p.7). The most common chosen research methods are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. As mentioned above, this study adopts a qualitative method, and with this in mind I will be exploring qualitative research in detail. I will be touching upon the definition of the qualitative approach, discussing the background, advantages and some critical views of this method. I will be describing the nature of the current study and outlining the stages taken and the reasons for adopting a qualitative approach. The overall aim of this section is to explore how qualitative research fits this study.

A qualitative design drawing on a phenomenological methodology was used to answer the research question. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena that involves studying the conscious experiences of a subject and how we experience things from a personal point of view (Langdridge, 2007). Therefore, this allows us to interpret and define aspects from the different philosophical points of view such as ontology, epistemology, logic and ethics. For example, speaking in terms of epistemology, phenomenology can be seen as an approach that seeks personal knowledge and subjectivity, thus helping to gain insights into people’s perspectives.

What is qualitative research?

Traditionally the use of qualitative research is widely applied in psychology, as well as in social sciences (Flick, 2002). A variety of epistemological, theoretical and philosophical assumptions has contributed to the development of qualitative research. There are summaries of the important influences from these (see examples: Crotty, 1998; Snape & Spencer, 2003; Green & Thorogood, 2004; Cresswell, 2009). Qualitative research is naturalistic in nature and it attempts to study the everyday life of a variety of groups or communities in their natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people construct meaning for themselves, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in it (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). We can say that the use of qualitative methods is more widely recognised and accepted especially in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Morse, 1994; Punch, 2011; Robson, 2011) and health sciences (Bowling, 2009; Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1998; Murphy & Dingwall, 1998).
The utility of qualitative methods has also been recognised in psychology. More recently, in the UK, the British Psychological Society now has a members’ section for Qualitative Methods in Psychology.

Qualitative research embraces the concept of inter-subjectivity usually understood to refer to how people construct meaning collectively in relationship to one another. This could take the form of a shared understanding of a situation, based on an emotional or epistemological consensus. This allows them to interpret the social world they inhabit (Nerlich, 2004). According to Charmaz (2000), the qualitative approach is closely related to constructivism because it allows you to explore subjective experiences. Looking at subjective experiences allows for the inclusion of a range of emotions, perceptions and thoughts. These factors can contribute to the overall understanding and meaning of the subjective experience and therefore the interpretation of this.

**Reasons for adopting a qualitative design**

Qualitative researchers are interested in how people relate to their experiences. This generated several reasons that influenced my choice of a qualitative design for my study. As a trainee counselling psychologist, I felt that adopting a qualitative design would help me capture how people experience a given research issue in a rich and in-depth manner. There are several key strengths for adopting a qualitative approach. Firstly, it enables researchers to explore the subjective aspect to how people experience and inhabit the world (Maxwell, 2004a). Furthermore, it is very appealing to psychologists and the utility of qualitative methods is widely recognised in psychology (Robson, 2011). It’s widely been used in psychology because it provides a more detailed insight into how people make meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The second key strength of the qualitative approach has much more to offer when we need to explore people’s feelings, thoughts or ask them to reflect upon their experiences (Nerlich, 2004). On that account, it gives us an idiographic understanding of participants’ experiences and enables the researcher to capture their unique perspectives.

Moreover, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to use a quantitative method because the numerical nature of the quantitative approach is unable to express the subtle complexity of individual experience. The third key strength of a qualitative design and the uniqueness of this approach is that the researcher is considered an integral part of a qualitative process; this creates an opportunity for the researcher to reflect not only on their own experiences, but
also on how they have influenced the process (Frost, 2011). Therefore, this approach allows me to have a more prominent role in the research, which is useful because I am a trainee counselling psychologist and this helps me to better understand the participants’ perspectives. The final key strength of qualitative design is a focus on credibility which strengthens the patterns in counselling psychology (Ponterotto, 2005a). I am drawn quite naturally to this design because I strongly believe it will enable me to capture the meaning and give a voice to the trainee counselling psychologists in their experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. This carries weight in my research, as counselling psychology is a new profession and therefore it is beneficial to the field to give light to those in the field.

Limitations of a qualitative design

Now that we have looked at some of the advantages of adopting a qualitative design, it is important to pinpoint some of its limitations. The first limitation of a qualitative approach is that it is often time-consuming (Maxwell, 2012). It is time-consuming in that it can take time to collect the actual data. Researchers not only have to collect the data, but also transcribe and analyse it. Therefore data is usually collected from a smaller sample, unlike a quantitative approach. For my own study, I spent six hours collecting data from three focus groups which consisted of twenty participants; this was an overwhelming process. The second limitation is that qualitative research is viewed as being easily influenced by bias, as it is often highly subjective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The quality of the study is highly dependent on the researcher and, as a result, this may be easily influenced by the researcher’s personal biases and preconceptions. Another criticism of the qualitative design is the problems associated with sampling and how these need to be addressed in order to ensure the credibility of research findings.

Mack et al. (2005) expresses the difficulty in collecting information from a range of people who suit the prerequisites of a target sample. This situation is seen as a limitation of the method because the researcher is compelled to select a certain proportion as the sample of study. In a qualitative study, the sampling plan used by the researcher can have an inherent potential for bias (Kolb, 2012). Bodgan and Biklen (2006) state that sampling strategies such as purposive, convenience and theoretical, are more likely to produce a biased sample. Primarily, the researcher must be aware of potential limitations of the study and honestly share them with the readers (Collet- Klingenberg, & Kolb, 2011). In this study, a purposive sampling method was used and it is important to acknowledge the limitation to this study for
that reason. This will be discussed further on with regards to the limitations of the method and how a biased sample may have been produced. The final limitation for this type of design is the question of whether the findings of a qualitative design can be replicated. Borman et al. (2007) assert that this changes the credibility and adequacy of the study. They further expand by explaining that replicating a study may not be very useful as the results from different researchers will vary. However, I would argue it would be thought-provoking to compare and contrast the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in other countries.

3.3 Qualitative research methods (focus group)

As previously stated, there are three different common qualitative methods that can be used to obtain data: participant observation, one-to-one interviews and focus groups. In this study I chose the third method, as only focus groups provide the means of achieving my goal of capturing a multiple layer of views, thoughts and feelings of how trainee counselling psychologists experience completing their thesis. A focus group is a popular qualitative method; it can be used as an effective means of eliciting data and to gather a broad overview of perspectives in a group. A simple way of defining a focus group is an “informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic” (Wilkinson, 2004). Broadly speaking, focus groups can be small or large but they are always “collective conversations” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008, p.375). A focus group can act as a forum to probe individuals’ attitudes, opinions and behaviour. Kitzinger (1994) theorises that it is called a focus group as it often involves a type of collective activity. This is in accordance with the focus groups that I conducted, as each group was invited to collectively debate and exchange viewpoints over a set of questions that I provided. I was aware that in order to have a successful focus group I had to ensure my participants were feeling comfortable and that I provided a safe, non-threatening environment to encourage open discussion between them (Hennink, 2007). Focus groups offer possibilities for researchers to explore ‘the gap between what people say and what they do’ (Conradson, 2005, p. 131).
Advantages of using a focus group

Focus groups can create data from multiple voices which can be an empowering process and it is interesting to further comprehend the dynamics in a group (Madriz, 2003). In this aspect, a focus group can capture the organic responses of participants and the natural way that an individual can react with others when placed in a group discussion (Kitzinger, 1995; Finch & Lewis, 2003). In this manner, a focus group also creates a great opportunity for the researcher to see and appreciate how people construct their own reality in a meaningful manner and, hence, enables the researcher to get closer to the data (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). Another strength of adopting a focus group is that it enables in-depth interactions to occur and simultaneously makes the process for the researcher to understand the shared experiences and to uncover hidden aspects (Gaiser, 2008). By employing focus groups, I was given the opportunity to interact at a personal level and, hence, this allowed me to gather more detailed information at a tacit level which was needed to effectively answer my research question.

Disadvantages of using a focus group

Despite the advantages of using a focus group as a qualitative method, it is important to acknowledge its limitations as a method of data collection. Silverman (2001) suggests some of the dilemmas that researchers encounter especially while interpreting their data. One potential issue with focus groups is that they run the risk of offering a more surface level exploration of participants’ experiences than individual interviews do. Furthermore, depending on the participants involved, in some focus groups more dominant voices can emerge that dominate discussions and overshadow the experiences of other participants (Hopkins, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2009). A further disadvantage of using focus groups is that it is possible they are prone to bias and it can be very time-consuming for the researcher when it comes to analysing the data (Mansell et al., 2004). Acocella (2011) points out two additional disadvantages of using focus groups; on occasions, the pace of the discussion can slow the process down and limit the natural exchange of ideas. There is a risk that not everyone has an opportunity to speak and share their view. Also, it was discussed that the presence of others can inhibit participants which often leads to their giving more socially desirable answers for fear of being judged.

Facilitating the focus groups

In order to facilitate the focus groups, before the session, I made and followed a checklist of
essential points which would aid the efficiency of the group. These points included ensuring
the availability and effectiveness of the audio equipment, being prepared to follow the correct
procedure in regards to documentation (consent forms and information), planning time
including saving extra time in case of any participants’ need to divulge important points and
the arrangement of the room in a practical manner (e.g. arrangement of chairs and also the
inclusion of a “Keep Quiet” sign to ensure there were no external distractions). During the
session, I again followed the procedure by ensuring all participants had signed consent forms
and had received the necessary information about the study and their right to participate in it. I
set guidelines and rules which the participants were required to follow in order to ensure there
was an organised discussion and that each person had the respect of others whilst speaking.

Throughout the discussion, as a moderator, I facilitated the discussion by listening attentively,
observing, asking questions and probing when needed (Marczak & Sewell, 2005). I tried to
reflect on all the points given, maintaining a respect for every individual’s opinion. I also
ensured that all participants were given an equal opportunity to speak and that these points were
valued as part of the discussion. Knowing that there are people with more confidence than
others and they tended to dominate the discussion, I tried to keep an equal balance in each focus
group by giving ten extra minutes of discussion. This enabled participants to add any additional
thoughts if they felt they had missed the opportunity to do so earlier on. After the session, I
facilitated the interpretation of results by writing as much information as possible so that I could
take advantage of the knowledge fresh in my memory. I made observations about body
language and how the participants interacted within the group and if there were any relevant
group dynamics including conflicts and clashes. I experienced the three focus groups differently
and it was a very enriching process to hear various participants’ views and how they made sense
of their experience of undertaking a doctoral thesis.

Participants and data collection
In order to select participants for this study, the technique of grounded theory was used.
Grounded theory uses non-probability sampling, where the sample numbers are unidentified at
the beginning of the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Cutcliffe,
2000). As Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested, grounded theory sampling aims to analytically
look at qualitative data in order to generate a theory. This study used purposive sampling to
select participants who were full-time or part-time trainee counselling psychologists in the
United Kingdom. Purposive sampling is used when the researcher has a particular interest and wishes to select participants with the idea that they have certain desired characteristics and therefore can aid the researcher with their particular theory. Jupp (2006) gave a noteworthy definition of purposive sampling:

A form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria which may include specialist knowledge of the research issue, or capacity and willingness to participate in the research. Some types of research design necessitate researchers taking a decision about the individual participants who would be most likely to contribute appropriate data, both in terms of relevance and depth (p. 244).

Furthermore, this idea of the usefulness of specific participants is supported by Roberts (1997) and Tashakkora and Teddlie (1998) who recognised the need for qualitative researchers to deliberately select participants in order to meet their criteria and support the proposed theory. I recruited the participants by creating posters and advertising through the British Psychological Society who were likely to represent a number of the training programmes across the United Kingdom. I also extended by contacting the Universities, some by sending emails and some by telephone. The number of responses received was low and often mixed. There weren’t many that were encouraging or positive with some programmes unwilling to participate due to time factors and schedule issues.

Suzuki et al. (2007) stressed that the relationship with participants is crucial to effective data gathering. I found it valuable to recruit trainee counselling psychologists as I am aware of my skills as a trainee counselling psychologist, which include empathy and a non-judgemental attitude, which gives me an advantage of being able to lead my research participants to experience a deep level of engaging with the discussion in the focus group. Hence, I strongly felt that maintaining a good relationship with the participants enabled me to enhance my data collection. I specifically chose trainee counselling psychologists for my study for the following reasons. From my personal point of view I was interested to know whether other trainee counselling psychologists had similar experiences to mine and I was curious about how they perceive and make meaning of their experiences and how they go about writing their doctoral thesis. The next reason was that this study used purposive sampling and the participants selected met the required characteristics in that they were in various stages of producing a thesis. This will enable me to gain an insight and capture their immediate experiences. Therefore trainee counselling psychologists were considered to be the only suitable participants.
Three focus groups were conducted in urban universities in order to collect the data. They consisted of various trainee counselling psychologists, some part-time and some full-time. In all of the groups, participants consisted of a mixture of ethnicities whose ages ranged from 23 to 55. In total, there were from 6 to 8 participants in each focus group. Both the first and third focus groups had a balanced mix of male and female participants; in contrast to the second focus group, which was mostly occupied by females. The third focus group was the only one which consisted of participants from more than one institute. All participants voluntarily participated in the focus groups; they were recruited by sending out emails to several institutions in the United Kingdom as well advertising through the British Psychological Society.

The participants selected were in the process of either starting or completing their doctoral thesis allowing for a range of points to be considered from all aspects of the process. Initially, there were some issues recruiting first year counselling psychology students who hesitated to participate because they had not started their theses, and to address this I emailed them directly to encourage them. They responded positively and were ready to take part in a focus group. For a qualitative design, 12 participants are considered sufficient (Patton, 2002). However, Sandelowski (1995) argued that the ideal sample size depended on the purpose of the research which means that it might be necessary to include more than the proposed 12. For my study I included 20 participants. Therefore, based on these two recommendations, my sample size appears sufficient as it is larger than the required amount.

**Interview protocol**

A semi-structured, face-to-face focus group interview, which is widely used in the qualitative method as a data collection technique, was carried out in order to elicit rich data collection (Asbury, 1995) and simultaneously encourage interaction between participants (see Appendix A for a copy of the interview schedule and Appendix B invitation letter).

The research question that was used in the focus groups was **What are the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists when undertaking a doctoral thesis?**. This research question was guided by three sub-questions which are listed below:

1. What challenges do trainee counselling psychologists encounter when undertaking a doctoral thesis?
2. What opportunities do trainee counselling psychologists see in undertaking a doctoral thesis?
3. How do trainee counselling psychologists view their research or doctoral thesis?
A list of prompts was also used in the interviews and it was very helpful as it encouraged participants to think and explore further their experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis including challenges, opportunities and simultaneously linking research into practice. An information pack consisting of an information sheet and an invitation to a focus group interview (see Appendix C) with full details about the aim of the study was sent to participants. All participants had to fill in a consent form (see Appendix D) and they were informed that they have the right to withdraw at any point during the study.

Having volunteered to take part in the study, all participants were sent an information sheet which gave them detailed information about the aim of the study and the interviewing process. Participants were interviewed using semi-structured questions. They were informed that they would be asked about their experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. The audiotaped interviews lasted around 60-90 minutes. The discussion of the focus group was recorded using an audiotape, and was transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory. The focus groups took place in centres in the United Kingdom which were considered suitable for the participants and researcher. The interview was audio recorded in a room with a sign to maintain silence so that no disturbance would occur during the interview and also to ensure confidentiality.
3.4 Grounded theory

An inductive form of qualitative research known as grounded theory will be used in this research. Grounded theory was developed by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, published in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In grounded theory, data collection and analysis are simultaneously conducted together. “A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents that is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship to one another” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.23). Strauss and Corbin (1998) explicitly pointed out that the value of the grounded theory lies in its ability not only to generate theory but also to ground the theory in the data.

The classic grounded theorists Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss (1987) described grounded theory as objectivist. However, grounded theory can also be classified as a positive assumption which signifies that it can be interpreted in multiple ways. Grounded theory can also be seen as an inductive, thematic analysis which involves the use of techniques which define categories and ideas which are then used to formulate theories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Grounded theory is a widely recognised qualitative design especially for its epistemological assumptions and methods of knowledge (Charmaz, 2008). It is applicable to both quantitative and qualitative studies. However, this study employs a qualitative method to capture the subject in a more precise manner and, furthermore, to provide a wider generalised explanation (Glaser, 2001). It is also considered as a suitable qualitative method for in-depth exploratory investigations because of its rigorous and systematic approach (Charmaz, 1995; Strauss & Corbin,1990;Willig,2008).Grounded theory approaches can be placed in either the positivist/post-positivist or interpretive/constructivist paradigms. Recent discussions in the literature about the philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory (Annells, 1996; Charmaz, 2006) indicate an evolution of grounded theory method that spans both the post-positivist classic grounded theory espoused by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory acknowledges the subjectivist stance of researchers who “construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and the research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p.10).
Phenomenological grounded theory research “enables the researcher to understand the nature and meaning of an experience for a particular group of people in a particular setting” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 4). This allows the researcher to comprehend the subjective experience that needs to be explored. The researcher then makes meaning of this and interprets the data in order to develop a theory, which can further create a framework for the investigation. Therefore I have selected grounded theory approach to analyse my data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I conducted my research in a reflective and transparent fashion (Mills, et al., 2006). Articulating my assumptions and experiences through reflective and analytical memos, written prior to and during data gathering and analysis, was helpful in achieving this transparency (Mills, et al., 2006). An essential aspect for grounded theorists is the necessity to immerse oneself as a researcher in the data (Charmaz, 1995; Glaser, 1978). This immersion allows the researcher to connect with the data and recognise concepts and categories that emerge. Here I would like to stress the difference between grounded theory and other methods. An example of a conventional method is quantitative analysis. A brief comparison can be seen below:

![Comparison of conventional research methods to grounded theory](https://example.com/comparison.png)

**Figure 3:** Comparison of conventional research methods to grounded theory (Jones, 2005)

Therefore the difference between a conventional and a grounded theory is that grounded theory takes the data itself as its starting point, whereas conventional research sets out to prove an already given theory, and thus the researcher first reads the literature. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest there are three stages of analysis within grounded theory; open coding, axial coding and selective coding.
In the first step, ‘open coding’, the researcher reads each line of the transcription and tries to identify codes; these can be single words or phrases which form the concepts of what is happening or what is implied. Next is ‘axial coding’ where relationships between concepts are discovered and thus additional concepts or categories are expected to emerge; “Categories are higher in level and more abstract than the concepts they represent” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.7). Thirdly, ‘selective coding’ is when you select your core categories. Grounded theory employs constant comparison, which is a central part of the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The main method of grounded theory is employing this constant comparison based on the assumption that a theory will emerge. I will be explaining below each step of grounded theory analysis with examples to illustrate these steps (see Appendix E for audit trail and Appendix F for posters).

The process of qualitative data analysis

*Open coding*: It’s the first step of data analysis and it is concerned with identifying, naming, categorising and describing meaningful words found in the data. This is normally done line-by-line, sentence-by-sentence or paragraph-by-paragraph. In this process the concepts emerge from the raw data and later are grouped into conceptual categories. In other words, it is breaking down the raw data into the first level concepts and second-level categories or subheadings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract</th>
<th>Open Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female 5: <em>When I mean challenge I don’t have five minutes, if I’m not studying I’m washing or I’m cooking, or I’m cleaning the house, so that’s what I mean with the five minutes.</em></td>
<td>No time, pressure, worried, stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balancing, family, domestic, multi-tasking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Example of a line-by-line open coding process from data.
**Axial Coding:** Axial coding consists of identifying relationships among the open codes. It aims to look at the connection or the relationship among the categories and their subcategories. It also checks if concepts and categories are related and accurately represent interview responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts / Open Coding</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No time, Pressure, Worried, Stress, Balancing, Family domestic, multi-tasking.</td>
<td>Unhelpful Emotions, Personal Difficulties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Example of identifying the relationship between open coding and subcategories.

**Selective Coding:** This involves identifying a story line, writing a story that integrates the categories in the axial coding and presenting the conditional propositions or hypotheses. This also involves a process of identifying core categories that emerge and comparing them with other categories. This process requires a constant comparison and refinement. Finally, these categories are integrated and a theory will be developed from this. This coding stage can be seen in the audit trail (Appendix E).
Reasons for adopting a grounded theory

There were several reasons behind selecting a grounded theory analysis for this study. First of all, grounded theory offers many advantages to research as it is suitable for the investigation of complex, multidimensional phenomena (Jones & Alony, 2011). It is also well equipped to discover socially related issues (Orlikowski, 2002). It is recommended for researchers to use grounded theory especially when very little is known about a topic, as I thought to be the case in my study (Locke, 2001). Due to these aspects, I regarded grounded theory as appropriate to explore the experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Moreover, grounded theory presents a distinct methodology and differs from other methods (Heath & Cowley, 2004). Unlike other methodologies, grounded theory aims to generate a theory, hence I found it useful as I wanted to generate a theory on a substantive area for which there are very few existing theoretical explanations. This will be valuable because of an apparent lack of integrated theory in the literature (Goulding, 2002). Furthermore, grounded theory is an exceptionally rigorous method (Partington, 2000) which could be useful in answering the questions posed and simultaneously in providing rigorous insight into areas that are relatively unknown by researchers (Bryant, 2002). Therefore it will provide the means of engaging with the data without having to develop theories or hypotheses beforehand. Another reason behind selecting a grounded theory as a method of choice for this study is that it “offers unique benefits to the doctoral researcher” as it “permits flexibility and freedom” (Jones & Alony, 2011, p.95). It therefore is credited for providing the researcher the opportunity to explore and develop knowledge of a phenomenon freely whilst allowing issues to emerge (Bryant, 2002; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001).

What is more, Creswell (2007) emphasises that the grounded theory approach encourages individuals to tell their stories and freely express thoughts and feelings, which empowers the individual’s perspective and adds value to their story. An additional reason was because a researcher that adopts the constructivist grounded theory paradigm addresses the subjective experiences (McCaslin & Scott, 2003) and interprets the meanings behind how the participants construct reality (Charmaz, 2000). This enabled me to capture the diverse layers of thoughts, ideas and opinions that can provide a more enriching data set.
Criticism of using grounded theory

Despite its strengths, grounded theory has not been without its critiques and poses some risks in a qualitative design. The first limitation of grounded theory is that it can be considered an exhausting process. Myers (2009) maintains that it is a time-consuming, tiring and laborious process. He explains further that the process of analysing the data is a challenge, especially for novice researchers as they become absorbed with the grounded theory process and may immerse themselves in the data to the extent that they lose sight of the overall process of discovering the themes that emerge. Goulding (1999) warns researchers of the danger of focusing too much on the codes in the process, without explaining or relating them to each other. For this reason, Allan (2003) suggests that the process of data collection and analysis cannot be rushed and researchers must be persistent and patient until the data emerges and becomes clear.

There is a constant debatable issue relating to how and when existing literature should be used during a grounded theory study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) and this is considered a second limitation. Glaser (1998) suggests that delaying the research of the existing literature until after the data is collected will decrease the chance of researcher bias. However, researchers argue that it is impossible to avoid this altogether as preconceptions exist with or without any reading around the subject. However, there is now research that suggests that conducting a literature review before data collection does not lead to bias or affect the rigour of grounded theory research but enhances theoretical sensitivity (Schreiber, 2001). This is supported by Giles et al. (2013) who stipulated that it can enhance creativity and rigour. Therefore, it is essential for novice researchers to openly acknowledge the influence of prior work in their perspectives of what is emerging from the data (Giles et al., 2013). The third limitation is that novice researchers utilising grounded theory are likely to face high probabilities of methodological errors (Hussein et al., 2014). Wilson and Hutchinson (1996) summarise the main misconceptions which have resulted in the 'methodological slurring' of grounded theory. These revolve around generation erosion, premature closure and methodological transgressions. Evans (2013) suggests that there are ways for novice researchers to avoid these potential methodological errors. The final criticism concerns the limited generalisability in grounded theory. As a matter of fact, the issue of generalisation is less focused in qualitative research. This is because the main aim of qualitative research concentrates on how people construct meaning and their subjective experiences (Hussein et al., 2014). Myers (2000) further supports that grounded theory qualitative studies have
continued to be criticised for their lack of generalisability. Wegner (2009) poses the question of whether findings from a qualitative research sample can be applied to a larger population. Most importantly, it is essential for the novice researcher to consider the lack of generalisability given the nature of grounded theory as a qualitative method.

3.5 Qualitative trustworthiness and rigour

Validity and reliability are the main means to establishing rigour in a quantitative design, in contrast to a qualitative design, where these two measures are not applicable standards for establishing rigour (Aguinaldo, 2004; Morgan & Drury, 2003). There is much discussion about the applicability of validity and reliability to qualitative research (Hoye & Severinson, 2007). Ryan et al. (2007) define rigour as a way of addressing credibility and integrity of the qualitative research process. Shenton (2004) describes trustworthiness as something which adds value to the research and its credibility. In order to demonstrate trustworthiness, the findings must reflect as closely as possible the data collected from the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The most common criteria used to evaluate qualitative research studies are credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Despite having received criticism from positivist researchers on ensuring quality, a range of strategies can be adopted by the researcher to address such challenges. In this study, strategies were employed to demonstrate the rigour and trustworthiness in a qualitative design (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and are considered below.

Member checking

Guba and Lincoln (1994) regard member checking as the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility. It is a process whereby “the final report or specific description or themes” are taken back to the participants (Creswell, 2009, p. 191) to offer them “an opportunity to provide context and an alternative interpretation” (Patton, 2002, p. 561).

In this study, a member check was carried out by taking the data and interpretations back to the participants so that they could confirm the credibility of the information. I emailed them the findings and asked them to review them and tell me whether the categories made sense and if the overall account was accurate. Creswell and Miller (2000) support the validity that member checking adds to the study as participants have an opportunity to view the summary
of the findings and to offer their feedback. With the lens focused on participants, I have been able to systematically check the data and the findings. Notwithstanding, there have been critics of member checking over the years, notably Bloor (2001) and Silverman (2006). Their points were that often participants have different motivations and views, which could lead them to alter their opinions or statements to the researcher and it is important for the researcher to bear this in mind. I do fully agree that the participants’ purposes may be different from mine and, for this reason, I was prepared to consider this and take feedback in a constructive manner.

Peer debriefing and peer validation

Peer debriefing is best described as a process where the researcher attains feedback from a peer outside the field of the study. This gives the researcher a different perspective and allows them to consider a more neutral view of the study. Peer debriefing is also referred to as analytical triangulation and can be seen as a method through which to enhance the credibility of the study (Nguyen, 2008). This supports Russell and Kelly (2002) who highlighted that peer debriefing can provide a multiple perspective for the researcher.

In this study, I welcomed feedback from my peers, colleagues and academics and utilised this to improve my research. A presentation was conducted whereby a peer’s view was considered and established into constructive feedback; this brought a fresh perspective to my research which helped me to enhance its validity. In addition, this study was validated by two peers who are familiar with the counselling profession, education and research. Although they were familiar with the profession, they were not experienced in it and were able to offer a unique and neutral perspective.

The summary of categories and the grounded theory analysis findings were both sent to them and in return they provided valuable insight into the study. This was achieved by their providing me with constructive feedback and exchanging emails with suggestions on how to improve the study. These points were all considered and, where applicable, were incorporated in the study. It was essential and valuable to receive peer feedback in order to limit the amount of bias and also to recognise any pitfalls in the study.
Frequent debriefing sessions with supervisor

Debriefing sessions with the supervisor can be seen as a useful tool to enhance learning by reviewing the research experiences and meeting goals (Mackenzie, 2002). For my study, in order to demonstrate rigour and trustworthiness, I ensured that I had frequent debriefing sessions with my supervisor. I also included several colleagues and members of the research supervision group but conducted mostly one-to-one sessions with my supervisor. During the sessions, we discussed methodological aspects, findings, literature review, data analysis and paid attention to any possible limitations of my study. For example, the analysis of my findings was rigorously supervised as we worked through each stage right from the categories, the relationship between them and finally the generation of the theory. I received valuable input during this process and found that it was helpful to receive feedback not only from my supervisor but other members in the research groups. In the sessions, I was able to take a step back, critique and evaluate my study and develop new strategies to improve my progress. Although there can often be challenges with supervisors, I was able to be honest and transparent with my supervisor and this allowed us to work through the research process and also address external issues such as procrastination and my lack of confidence in writing.

Rigour in analysis

Throughout the analysis, I employed strategies to demonstrate reliability in my analysis and ensure coherence in my findings. The interpretation of my data was based on semi-structured interviews consisting of three focus groups. Grounded theory analysis was inductive and was explicitly developed to guide researchers to generate rather than to verify theory; this requires a rigorous and structured analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I believe that I have taken measures to ensure qualitative methods in my findings and that I am likely to generate a substantive theory from my study (Galagher et al., 2012). Throughout the process of data collection, I took reflective notes containing immediate and later thoughts and this can be seen as contributing rigour to the analysis. For example, for this study, I have maintained a rigorous analysis in my findings (see Appendix E of stages of analysis of the findings).

Early in the analysis, I analysed three transcriptions line-by-line and tried to identify concepts and categories. I returned to the data several times because I was strongly influenced by the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I revised it several times until an agreement on the concepts, categories and core categories was approved by
my supervisor. It took several revisions to make sense of and to interpret the relationships of the categories, core categories and finally generating a theory. Mayan (2009) and Morse et al. (2002) suggest that by independently completing the transcript, reliability was achieved through repetition. In this study, repeated themes were grouped into categories that represented the findings. In order to enhance the data creditability, an audit trail was established to take note of decisions made throughout the process. Towards the end of the analysis, an additional reliability was considered whereby a colleague who had some experience in grounded theory analysis examined the summary of the findings and offered critical comment. Together with the help of my supervisor, further refinement was done on the findings. Goldkuhl and Conholm (2003) insisted on the importance of grounding the theory, which consists of both checking and offering new creative insight, which can result in an improvement on the theory. In my study, I ensured a constant checking and creative process occurred during the analysis of my data. For example, I engaged myself through a creative process by using different colours to represent my categories and created posters summarising my findings (see Appendix F for posters). These strategies were useful in ensuring theoretical coherence and interpreting the data for my study.

**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is important so that the researcher remains aware of the whole research process and acknowledges the inner subjective experiences (Willig, 2001). Rennie (2004) stated that researcher reflexivity can facilitate credibility and enables researchers the opportunity to understand their own experiences and beliefs about the world and how they may affect the research process. It benefits researcher and their findings by allowing self-reflection; which simultaneously exposes any form of bias (Finlay, 1998). Reflexivity enables us to seek and capture how researchers transform and get involved in the study they intend to investigate and evolve in the research process (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999).

As a researcher I have always had an inherent interest to look from the perspective of trainee counselling psychologists and this is because I am one myself. This curiosity and eagerness to know how other people experience the process of undertaking a doctoral thesis has always been an exciting phenomenon. Therefore in considering reflexivity I kept a personal journal so that I can understand the process of undertaking a doctoral thesis and discover my own thoughts, feelings and attitudes, from the beginning until the end process of completing the thesis. Keeping a personal journal can be seen as a strategy to examine personal assumptions and views and clarify individual core beliefs and subjective experiences (Russell & Kelly, 2002).
The use of my personal journal was mainly for creating transparency throughout my research process so that I am aware of key assumptions and possible biases. It was also used as a personal self-reflection so that I could articulate my ideas. This was a very helpful procedure in order to increase self-awareness in my own experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Having a personal journal allowed me to separate my thoughts and not influence my participants in the focus groups. Keeping and using a personal journal enabled me to carry out my research in a reflective and transparent manner by articulating my assumptions and experiences during the whole process of undertaking my thesis (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). This was essential because there are various stages that one undergoes whilst trying to complete a doctoral thesis and I wanted to consider all the different feelings experienced at each stage.

Below I am providing two extracts from my personal journal:

May 16 2014, 13.20 > I am feeling nervous looking at my messy thesis...I feel like giving up and I don’t see it taking shape; it’s like a huge burden I am carrying. My phone rang, a friend called and said “let’s go for lunch” but I was reluctant to go, feeling this enormous sense of guilt... if I go I’ll feel worse... I look at my time line and I’m afraid I won’t make it.

Here is an example of a positive quote:

Sep 16 2014, 12.50 > I eventually sent the methodology to my supervisor. So exciting to finally understand all these terms when some time ago they sounded like Greek to me. Now I can have a clearer picture of the process. I can certainly see this chapter taking shape. Tonight I’ll reward myself and go out with some friends without feeling guilty. I feel a sense of relief.

3.6 Ethical issues

In completing this study a number of ethical issues were considered. Firstly, this research was ethically approved by the School of Education at the University of Manchester. It was carried out within the guidelines of the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2011) and was informed by the Health and Care Professions Councils Standards, Performance and Ethics (HCPC, 2008). In carrying out this research, the
researcher collected qualitative data. Therefore it was necessary to strictly follow ethical guidelines at every stage of the research process. Each participant involved in this research was given a full information sheet, which detailed what was involved in the research, prior to beginning a semi-structured focus group interview (see Appendix C for information sheet). Any volunteer for the focus groups was given an information sheet and the consent form beforehand. The information sheet contained details about the research as well as contact details of the researcher and the supervisor. In the second stage of the research, every participant was again provided with the information sheet, prior to giving their consent and signing a consent form (see Appendix C for information sheet and Appendix D for consent form). The interviews for the focus groups were carried out in a semi-structured manner. As part of the interview protocol, the participants of each group were informed that they were free to withdraw at any time and they had a choice or whether or not to answer, without having to give reasons.

All participants were given information about the aims and process of the research at the start of their interviews (see Appendix A for interview schedule). Informed consent was also considered (Haverkamp, 2005) and I monitored the participants’ consents throughout the interviews, by looking for any cues of discomfort. If there was any doubt over the wellbeing of the participants, they were reminded that they were free to withdraw at any point. Following the interviews, the participants had the chance to ask any questions they had about the project. Participants were provided with the contact details of my research supervisor and informed that if they had any concerns about the research and did not feel comfortable speaking with me, they could contact my supervisor.

The next ethical issue that was considered was confidentiality. For this research I ensured all electronic data were kept in encrypted files and any paper copies of data were kept in secure storage. Participants that expressed interest were asked to provide their names and email addresses if they were happy to join the focus groups to share their experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. The list of names and contact details were kept in an encrypted electronic file. Confidentiality was ensured through safe password storage and using codes that protected the participants’ identities. In addition to this, the transcript was thoroughly read and any information that was seen as potential identification of the participant was edited, to ensure that participants’ identities were protected throughout the study.
### 3.7 Chapter summary

Within this chapter, I have explained the design of this current study. Initially I outline my epistemological position as a researcher. For the purpose of this research, I came to believe that there are multiple ways of constructing and interpreting reality (Maxwell, 2011) which has led me to adopt a constructivist epistemological position. The constructivist researcher tends to rely upon the "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2003, p.8) and recognises the impact on the research of their own background and experience. The constructivist researcher is most likely to rely on a qualitative data method (Mertens, 2005) and, in considering the research question for this study, the data analysis is well suited to a qualitative approach. In this chapter, I have described how a qualitative design was used and have covered crucial areas such as recruitment, data collection, data analysis and procedure involved at each stage. I have concluded this chapter with reference to the potential ethical issues which were present in the study and how I attempted to ensure quality for this study.
Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings

This chapter illustrates the qualitative findings of the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom. It also includes the discussion and further critical use of the literature. At the end of the chapter I will outline how I address the methodological limitation of this study.

Within the qualitative stage of this research, data from semi-structured focus group interviews were analysed using techniques from the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Rennie et al., 1988). The research question that was used in this study was **What are the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists when undertaking a doctoral thesis?** The following three sub-questions guided the research question and are listed below:

1. What challenges do trainee counselling psychologists encounter when undertaking a doctoral thesis?
2. What opportunities do trainee counselling psychologists see in undertaking a doctoral thesis?
3. How do trainee counselling psychologists view their research or doctoral thesis impacting their practice?
4.1 Grounded theory analysis

The grounded theory analysis involved three stages: The first stage was to pinpoint the codes that came up from the raw data, which made up the concepts. In the second stage I compared the concepts with each other and, thus, discovered new concepts and categories. As a result, categories and relationships emerged by making constant comparisons between these concepts. In the final stage, I identified two core categories that represent the trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences in undertaking a doctoral thesis. The first category, which is prominent during the focus group interview, is the obstacles in completing a thesis; this category emerges as the broader term that describes the challenges trainee counselling psychologists may encounter in all areas of undertaking a doctoral thesis. The second category is positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis. This category was a positive reflection on trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences in all aspects of undertaking a doctoral thesis.

The theory that emerged from this study shows that trainee counselling psychologists have both positive and negative experiences which appear to fluctuate during the process of undertaking a thesis and vary from person to person due to individual circumstances. Along with the interpretation of the findings, I will evaluate whether they are supported or contradicted by the existing literature. I will explain how the findings have answered the main research question. Below, I will discuss the two core categories that emerged throughout the process of the focus group interviews. Next, I will consider the potential methodological weaknesses and strengths of this study. In addition to this, the subsequent chapter will present an overview of the study with future research recommendations.
4.2 Table of the findings

Table 3: Core Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Core Category 1: Obstacles in completing a thesis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Unhelpful emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Fear</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Frustration</td>
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<td>● Guilt</td>
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<td>● Stress</td>
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<td>2) Demanding Nature of a Thesis</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Challenges in recruiting participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Methodology, epistemology and philosophy concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Difficulty in meeting deadlines</td>
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<td>● Difficulty in deciding research topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Personal Difficulties</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Procrastination</td>
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<td>● Unexpected circumstances</td>
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<td>● Lack of interest and motivation</td>
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<td>● Maintaining self-care</td>
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<td>● Lack of experience</td>
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<td>● Lack of confidence in writing</td>
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<td>● Social Isolation</td>
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<td>● Difficulty in integrating research and practice</td>
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<td>● Difficulty in balancing academics, personal life and family responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Lack of Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Ineffective supervisory relationship</td>
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<td>● Delay in feedback</td>
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<td>● Problems with university guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Core Category 2: Positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### 1) Acquiring new experiences
- Understanding the scientist-practitioner model
- Developing new research skills

### 2) New Opportunities
- Career prospects
- Specialising in a field
- Publishing

### 3) Sense of achievement
- Attaining a doctorate title
- Being inspired and motivated
- Forming an identity

### 4) Creating a supportive network
- Building a good relationship with supervisor
- Supportive family and peers

### 4.3 Core categories
I have identified two core categories and eight subcategories that arose during the focus groups that reflected on their overall experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. As the aim of this thesis was to explore the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis, the categories are related directly to the participants’ experiences of this process. These consist of both the beginning and end of the process, and before and after completing a doctoral thesis. In the section below, I will explain the categories in a more detailed manner. All of these eight subcategories will be illustrated using quotes extracted from the focus groups, which were used to provide evidence to support the data.
4.3.1. Core category 1: Obstacles in completing a thesis

The first core category that emerged from the focus groups was obstacles in completing a thesis. Participants described various obstacles and challenges that they faced during the process. This category was prominent in the experiences of nearly every participant with the following four subcategories being identified: unhelpful emotions, demanding nature of the thesis, personal difficulties and lack of communication. The subcategories were a mixture of internal and external factors that affected the progress of the thesis. These subcategories will be further explained below.

Subcategory 1: Unhelpful emotions

Most of the participants from all three focus groups expressed emotions that were viewed as a hindrance in completing their doctoral thesis. The trainee counselling psychologists experienced these obstacles at different levels depending on their circumstances. Unhelpful emotions comprise fear, anxiety, frustration, guilt and stress; these concepts will be explained below.

Fear

A significant number of participants reported feeling fear in the process of completing their thesis. In some cases, fear was expressed through other words such as “scary”, “frightening”, or “overwhelming”. Some of their experiences are illustrated below:

Paulette: It’s the most uncomfortable, scary feeling, you know, this big research. And so it gives you sort of, I don’t know, it makes it easier for me to put it out of my mind and kind of shelve it for a while, you know.

Natalie: I think it becomes much harder with the thesis. With the assignment it wasn’t as difficult, but with the thesis it’s just … There’s something very unboundaried about a thesis...

Hala: Kind of leaves me with this sense of how competing the two emotions are. This kind of feeling of excitement and also stress, like fear and excitement, they’re kind of close really, aren’t they?

Travis: And, I don’t know, failing... can you fail viva, I don’t know?

Athena: Yes, for me that’s like the scariest thing because I’m going to be tested in terms of my knowledge and I’m going to have to... And I feel like I need to be quite fancy about it. But at the same time I agree with you. I think scientist simplicity research is simplicity. So there’s a real kind of... there’s a tension there for me.
Paulette perceives fear as a sense of being overwhelmed by managing the thesis and the workload associated with it. This further leads her to admit to and justify procrastination. Natalie expresses an underlying fear in her ability to manage the thesis as a whole and to impose her own deadlines. This clearly indicates that fear can manifest in two different ways; internal and external. Paulette directly expresses her fear in completing the task, whereas Natalie does not explicitly state her fear; it is more a sense of uncertainty that lies underneath. Paulette and Natalie reported feeling fear in the process of managing their theses and were uncertain whether they would be able to sustain the other requirements of the course as well as working towards completing their theses. This experience may lead to other self-sabotaging behaviour such as procrastination and loss of motivation (Kearns et al., 2008). This study cautions that an initial sense of fear may develop into a cumulative set of negative attitudes that may impede the progress of the thesis.

Hala, interestingly, expresses mixed emotions in the above excerpt. She denotes how she may experience fear combined with excitement, and the effort she has to make in trying to juggle the two emotions while writing her thesis. For a number of participants, writing the thesis created a feeling of uneasiness and this can be identified as an internal obstacle. A study, entitled 'navigating in unknown waters', notes that "at the beginning of the dissertation research process doctoral students cannot see the end, nor can they imagine how they will get there" (Bench et al., 2002, p. 289). The feeling of fear expressed by the participants correlates with this metaphor. This reflects the demanding and unpredictable nature of undertaking a doctoral thesis and doctoral students may feel uncertain and face further challenges.

Some participants did not directly express fear in completing their thesis but in facing the viva examination. For example, Travis was feeling uncertain about whether one can fail the viva examination and this appears to raise a concern for him. In a similar fashion, Athena feels that the viva examination appears to be the scariest element in completing a thesis. There is substantial research that supports this (see Burnham, 1994; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Trafford & Leshem, 2002), which showed that students experience a wide range of negative emotions and concerns when thinking about the viva. Murray (2003) found that students who are not accustomed to dealing with uncertainty will have difficulty in the viva. This substantial research shows that doctoral students may face a double challenge in completing the thesis and facing the viva examination.
Anxiety

Several participants described feeling anxious while trying to complete the thesis. This includes managing, organising different parts of the thesis and feeling stressed or pressured which creates an unhelpful emotion of anxiety. Some participants also used the word “worry” to describe this emotion. It can be expected that trainee counselling psychologists, at some point, will experience a sense of worry or anxiety about numerous aspects. The following quotes display a similarity between participants who experienced the above concept:

Jonathan: Kind of I suppose in some ways it fills me with dread just in terms of thinking, oh God, how am I going to do this huge piece of work... But then you’ve got to balance that with is it something that’s doable in the time that you’ve got, particularly if you’re on a course like this where you’ve got lots of other things to do as well.

Mark: In addition to time management I’d say anxiety management as well. And trying to manage what I read. So not getting into the trap of starting to read one thing and panicking that I’m not reading about something. Hearing of people talk about different theories or what they do in their practice and thinking, oh God, I’ve got to read up something about that because I don’t know anything about that. Yeah, trying to keep a lid on with that is a challenge.

Elaine: I have to agree that one of the challenges might be, when you’re looking at someone else, especially if they’re ahead of you, and the challenge of how do I manage my anxiety about the fact I am not doing this thing and I can’t get my head around it, and then you have another challenge which is about acceptance.

Todd: I’m constantly worried about the quality of my work, especially regarding my data analysis and regarding my ability to write.

Jonathan perceives completing a thesis as experiencing a sense of dread. Moreover, he finds that achieving a balance of the elements in completing the thesis is essential and, given the demanding nature of a doctorate in counselling psychology course, this appears to be a challenge in the process. The participant further describes that time is also a challenge and ensuring whether the thesis is doable can be an obstacle in completing it. Similarly, Mark feels that anxiety can hinder the completion of his thesis, as there is a sense of overwhelming pressure from all components of the counselling psychology course and the pressure to meet the requirements. Mark and Elaine appear to report similar feelings of the anxiety felt when
comparing their own work to the work of their peers in terms of knowledge and amount of work completed. Todd describes one of the challenges of completing a thesis as the constant worry of ensuring the quality and smooth production of the thesis. This is consistent with the study done by Pyhalto et al. (2009) who found that the correlation between dissatisfaction with the learning environment, stress, exhaustion and anxiety were some of the challenges experienced by doctoral students. Evidently, there is a sense of competition and anxiety that arose when participants felt that they were not doing well enough in comparison to other trainee counselling psychologists.

In particular, Elaine specifically reported feelings of inadequacy when comparing herself to others. Martin et al. (2003) maintain that academic competition exists in these situations and it is during this time that students are prone to self-sabotaging behaviours. This may indicate that academic competition could reinforce positive effect because some doctoral students thrive in such an atmosphere but for others this could cause further complications such as delay, lack of motivation and procrastination. Similar experiences can be found in the study by Castell et al. (2009) which found that anxiety negatively affects doctoral students’ writing ability. Todd, who shared his constant worry or anxiety, displayed such negativity. This clearly shows that not only is there a pressure to complete the thesis, but there is also an underlying pressure to be consistent and to maintain a high standard of work throughout the course.

**Frustration**

The concept of frustration was identified and described by participants. The following are extracts of the focus groups in which the trainees expressed feelings of frustration whilst trying to complete their doctoral thesis.

*Mark: Oh yes. Going back to the last question with the challenges and the frustrations for me is that I want to read more and I haven’t got the time. Because I see all of these advantages of when I read about something and being able to apply it, I want to be able to read more but I can’t.*

*Travis: I find it is a challenge in preparation for my research because I think that time could be better used. I’m not going into group therapy on anxiety and how to manage anxiety. I understand that’s part of the process of doing research. And at the beginning, it either frustrated me at the beginning but I could understand it. But now we’ve got to a place where I think, okay, now we need to use this time wisely.*
Mark and Travis reported a shared experience in that they were frustrated with time management and the inability to develop the thesis any further due to time constraints. For example, Mark expresses frustration that he wants to carry out more extensive reading in certain areas but is limited due to deadlines and the fact that his time is already consumed with other aspects of the thesis. Travis expresses frustration with the time management of others and that they are not always on the same track in regards to how he feels time should be spent, particularly in lessons, and he feels this hinders the preparation of his own thesis. Mark and Travis found that having insufficient time led to many other issues such as the inability to produce good quality work, to get more things done and to meet all the deadlines. Due to this Mark and Travis felt very frustrated and disappointed for not being able to achieve their goals. Blum (2010) found that students who successfully followed the timeline of completion experienced less frustration than those who were unsatisfied with the amount of time given. This supports the results of the focus groups which showed that participants expressed frustration when they felt they did not have enough time to complete their thesis.

Guilt

Guilt was an unhelpful emotion that was reported by some participants in the process of trying to complete their thesis. A common factor was the experience of internal guilt and, interestingly, these feelings arose when their time was spent on something other than their research.

Natalie: The most difficult thing is the impact it’s had on my ability to allow myself to enjoy myself. I had a week off recently and I had an amazing time, but I noticed as the week was coming up I was getting so much guilt. I don’t think a thesis should cause that much guilt.

Linda: It depends, but the guilt for me as well has been quite overwhelming at times when you’re not... when I’m not doing as much work as I feel I should be, and it’s just this thing hanging over you. It feels like that’s hanging over you all the time like some horrible black cloud and you just want to tell it to go away, and it’s just there, and if you go out

Margie: I’ll echo that, the guilt stuff.

Natalie: I think it’s almost like when you have to ... it gets hidden under all the guilt and pressures, but you’re right.

Natalie states that the most difficult part of the thesis is not the writing itself, but how the thesis has consumed her and her time. She reports strong feelings of guilt that she took an
extended break and this resulted in an overwhelming sense of regret. Natalie further describes the feeling of guilt as being often hidden. Concurrently, Linda describes guilt as an omnipresent force that continues to hang over her throughout the process. As with Natalie, she experiences this emotion when she feels that she has not devoted as much time as she should to her thesis and this results in a feeling of guilt, which is echoed by Margie. Frustration often leads to a feeling of guilt in one of its many facets. An article by Mitchell (1992) asserts that students constantly experience feelings of guilt, as there are so many aspects of the thesis involved that it can be argued there is always something to do. He further maintains that it is very difficult not to feel guilty when focusing on something other than the thesis. This is a significant article in that it discusses how guilt can occur at any point of undertaking a doctoral thesis and emphasises how guilt is a common feeling. For instance, Natalie felt guilty when she let herself enjoy other aspects of life instead of writing her thesis. Margie appeared apprehensive and was reluctant to discuss her feelings of guilt in the group. Since guilt is a hidden emotion, it can be difficult to disclose to others. It was also found that guilt is something that can be experienced throughout the process or something that can arise from time to time.

**Stress**

Stress was a prominent emotion reported in the focus groups. This emotion is an unhelpful one as it can have a negative effect on the progress of the thesis. Below are sections which identify and illustrate stress as being a common problem amongst trainee counselling psychologists.

Janice: *I think we’re constantly stressed anyway from the first day through this course. It’s stress. I don’t know how I’m going to live without it after. Who am I without stress?*

Jenny: *It’s been quite a stressful experience up until this point so far.*

Todd: *Undertaking a doctoral thesis has been the most stressful time of my life. There are many worries from the start.*

Hala: *I know that with all the kind of ethics procedures going through I felt really stressed just waiting and that it had been taken out of my hands and there wasn’t really a great deal that I could do. I couldn’t progress.*
Of all the unhelpful emotions experienced by trainee counselling psychologists, stress appears to be a major problem in completing a doctoral thesis. Janice, Jenny, Todd and Hala had common experiences of stress in various situations and further identified internal and external factors that contribute to their stress. Jenny and Todd both describe completing their doctoral thesis as an extremely stressful event. Hala describes the stress that she feels in greater detail. She feels that external factors and requirements, such as clearing ethical procedures, add to her stress and that she felt a sense of helplessness during this time. Research conducted shows that doctoral students do experience high levels of stress (International Postgraduate Student Mirror 2006; Kurtz-Costes, Helmk, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Toews et al., 1993; Toews et al., 1997). It is evident the large amount of studies highlights that stress is a common problem in undertaking a doctoral thesis. Likewise, Stubb et al. (2011) explored doctoral students’ experiences relating to stress and workload. Surprisingly, the participants did not express feeling exhausted at a physical level but rather on the emotional side of stress. Janice perceived the emotional side of stress differently from the other participants. Janice appears to be confident and to have a clear understanding that stress was something that she expected, while completing her thesis. Therefore she accepts the idea of stress and views it as a natural element of the course. The other participants held different opinions on stress, regarding it as a major problem and some did not foresee that completing a thesis would be a stressful process. This shows that one’s perception of stress may affect its impact on the thesis.

A recent study conducted by Pyhalto et al. (2012) supported these findings by highlighting doctoral students’ high levels of stress during the process of writing a thesis. This clearly indicates that stress can be triggered not only in conducting a research but also in writing a thesis. This study clearly shows how the thesis produces high levels of stress for participants and how this stress can have a negative effect on those undertaking one. It indicates that stress management is essential in the process of writing a thesis, in order to maintain progress and a clear focus. McCormack (2009) suggested that emotions identified as negative were prominent among doctoral students undertaking a thesis but can be viewed as a helpful way of completing the thesis. This observation corresponds to the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists whereby unhelpful emotions may be considered as negative, they may motivate doctoral students to carry on and complete their thesis.
Subcategory 2: Demanding nature of a thesis

The second subcategory that was identified from the focus groups was the demanding nature of a thesis. This included challenges in recruiting participants, methodology, epistemology and philosophy concerns, difficulty in meeting deadlines and difficulty in deciding research topic. These will be further explored below:

Challenges in recruiting participants

Several trainee counselling psychologists found that recruiting participants in their thesis was a challenge. Some of the difficulties they faced were problems with permission or consent and also issues regarding access to vulnerable participants such as young people or older adults. The following quotes illustrate some of the challenges they experienced:

Margie: *I think access has been more difficult than I expected it to be, so I’m wondering if I had got a bit of a naïve perspective. I know I’m safe, do you know what I mean, and I know that my idea was approved by the university but actually getting into a setting where you’ve got access to an adolescent has been quite difficult to the point where I think if someone who knew me personally hadn’t put a word in for me, I’m not sure.*

Janice: *I had to change my original ideas a lot because I wanted to do this with vulnerable groups, and I realised the ethics was going to be a nightmare, so due to lack of time I had to change completely my ideas, so now I’m looking at something which I’m not as passionate about.*

Isabel: *And some aspects that can be quite random can’t they? It might depend on the availability of participants or what’s happened with one’s ethics procedures or…*

Margie appears to find it difficult to gain access to her participants. She experiences difficulty as she has chosen to work with young adults, which falls into the previously mentioned vulnerable participant category. Although she has followed the guidelines and procedures, she was unable to access her participants without the influence of someone in the profession. Janice is an example of what can happen when a trainee counselling psychologist is not given permission to access a particular group of participants and how this can have a negative effect on the overall thesis. Due to the strict procedures and time constraints of gaining access, she is now committing her time to a subject that she is not passionate about, which is something that is bound to have an effect on the quality of her work and her overall progress. Isabel describes the unpredictability of the recruitment process. She discusses how certain factors can be out of the trainee counselling
psychologist’s control, which can cause problems in the completion of the thesis. Such factors can include availability of the participants and concentration on ethical procedures.

The issue of recruiting participants was a concern raised by most of the trainee counselling psychologists. Margie, Janice and Isabel found that the challenges in recruitment included difficulty in getting access, availability of participants and approval by the university. Isabel strongly felt that this was an unpredictable issue and it depends on circumstances over which she has no control. Furthermore, this delay and complication may cause further problems such as time management, lack of motivation and stress. Studies conducted by Woods et al. (2000) and Hulley et al. (2001) found that a number of problems often arise during the recruitment process. These included problems with communication and getting consent from participants. These studies are consistent with the experiences of the focus groups as they show that external factors can sometimes impede the recruitment of participants, creating further delays in the thesis.

Methodology, epistemology and philosophy concerns

Methodology is a part of a thesis and it describes the method chosen in an area of study. It is possible to choose a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodology. It is a mandatory part of a thesis and some participants reported difficulties in this area due to its demanding nature. The quotes below show the uncertainty about the choice of methodology.

Todd: In addition, the world of qualitative research methodology seemed to be so rich and abundant that at times I struggle to have a sometimes needed 'definite' answer on how to do things.

Elaine: It depends what your research style is too, so it depend on your method. If you’re doing a heuristic study or something you might be ... It’s quite important for you to retain that passion. Are you doing discourse analysis?

Margie: I wanted to do mixed methods and it was the quantitative bit that was dropped. I haven’t thought about that before but that is interesting, isn’t it, but then to be honest the discourse analysis, but that was oh no, it’s too big, you need to drop one of them. Yes, to a certain degree I got the sense it would be that one that would go.
Frequently, some participants found that the methodology, epistemology and philosophy aspects caused concern for their thesis. Todd found that a qualitative design is not easy to comprehend and he was unsure whether this method would produce the desired results. Elaine, on the other hand, felt uncertain about the method she would use for her study, as she is afraid that if she made the wrong decision it might lead to a loss of interest in her study. She believes it is possible to even lose passion for the subject due to choosing the wrong method which can introduce feelings of doubt or uncertainty about the thesis. In the case of Margie, choosing a feasible method was her main concern but she was offered guidance by her supervisor. Margie had originally chosen a mixed methodology and eventually decided to drop this mixture. She expresses that she was compelled to drop one of these components due to the enormity of this method. It is indicated that there was outside influence from a supervisor and this had an effect on her methodology. Wisker (2001) states that a common challenge that is prevalent among PhD students is the area of methodology, whereby students often feel uncertain about whether the methodology adopted is suitable to answer the research questions.

When completing a doctoral thesis, it is important to consider the position of epistemology and philosophical assumption. Epistemology can play an important role in the overall completion of the thesis. This concept is concerned with the production of knowledge and can be closely related to the previously discussed uncertainty of methodology. Two participants in particular raised concern in this area of epistemology:

Hala: I don’t think I really had a coherent sense of what counselling psychology was. And so that felt really difficult. That was such a challenge to think, well, what is this profession and what sort of research would fit that profession. And so what kind of research will I be doing, how does that fit me? So it’s kind of all these practical things and then also engaging with kind of more, I don’t know, like

Elaine: Just even the first chapter, just the sub-headings for the chapter, what’s in the methodology chapter. A lot of it for me, the hardest part was the epistemology, thinking about what was the kind of knowledge I was after and what did I want from the study. That was a lot of thinking, lots and lots of thinking, and lots of reflexivity.

Hala found the concept of epistemology difficult to grasp in relation to her doctoral thesis and her profession. She appears to question her philosophical assumptions when trying to make progress with the doctoral thesis and questions if her research fits into the counselling profession. She recognises and identifies a struggle with the necessity to incorporate and
consider other aspects in this process, such as relevance to the profession. Elaine experiences similar feelings in that she reports a struggle with the epistemology aspect of the doctoral thesis. She expresses concern with individual chapters that are normally required of the thesis. She describes in particular the difficulty that she experienced from the first chapter. Elaine appears to have spent a significant amount of time thinking about these aspects, particularly the methodology chapter, which involves aspects of epistemology. Hala and Elaine found that understanding ideas of epistemology and philosophy to be challenging. The challenge was due to recognising the relevance to the counselling profession in the limited time available. Kiley and Wisker (2008) conducted a study on how students engage with epistemology and it was found that students struggle due to lack of confidence, confusion and feeling stuck in this area. Doctoral students that struggle in the area of epistemology may require further guidance and support as the epistemology stance is paramount in deciding the methodological choice.

**Difficulty in meeting deadlines**

In order to successfully complete a counselling psychology doctoral programme, trainee counselling psychologists must, on top of completing the thesis, also manage other assignments such as theory and research papers. Participants described the difficulty they faced in managing these requirements and meeting deadlines.

**Mark:** *I think that’s probably the biggest one when thinking about thesis which you start doing, then you’ve got the other smaller bits of research, case study, process report, systematic review, your practice in there as well. Just your own personal reading…improving your knowledge base and everything else you can fit under that.*

**Jonathan:** *That was a massive thing for me. The unilateral programmes where you’re able to retain that focus, for me there’s that assignments and we’ve got practice itself, and you mentioned a few of the things there with taking risks and involved in selecting the piece of research and deciding on that. That’s been one of the most difficult things for me from the start because on the one hand there’s the pragmatic concern of getting it done.*

**Janice:** *I don’t understand why we have to have assignments instead of having the thesis and the practice. I think if they took out the assignments that could be more manageable; you’d have more time to focus on the thesis and do even a bigger project or even those 30,000 words that goes in the assignment, why don’t you put it in the thesis? It would be on one focused project instead of being*
all around. I just don’t get why we have to do all these other case studies. I can see the value. I just don’t understand why.

Hala: I think we can get so head down in the procedure like meeting the goals and meeting these, you know, little mini deadlines and being on target and what do we have to do next, that we can lose sight of the broader kind of questions that underpin doing research.

Mark describes in further detail the number of assignments that is required of him. Trainee counselling psychologists must be able to also manage smaller aspects of their doctoral degree such as reports and papers. It is also important to note that Mark brings up the difficulty of finding time for reading in order to improve his knowledge of the profession, an aspect that is important for the doctoral programme. All these requirements can lead to students reporting difficulties in finding a balance between managing their assignments and meeting deadlines, in addition to completing their doctoral thesis. Jonathan appears to be in agreement with Mark and also lists the quantity of assignments that trainee counselling psychologists must complete in order to obtain their doctorate. He also mentions an added component which requires time and dedication; the practical component. Janice went so far as to question the purpose of all of these assignments and suggested that it would be more beneficial to incorporate the assignments into the thesis, allowing for more dedication to one project, rather than be distracted by other written aspects. Hala states that the various deadlines distract from the overall goal of the thesis and that it is possible to become wrapped up in these set deadlines as opposed to maintaining a clear focus on the thesis.

A lot of participants reported that trying to meet deadlines created difficulties in managing time during their doctoral thesis. This issue is often common for participants to report, due to the demanding nature of the course. Following are some of the quotes that highlight the issue:

Janice: To be honest, we’re not given as much time to do the research project in these programmes. We only have the third year to do the whole thing, where in my head it’s like it’s a doctorate, it means it’s a PhD, so I have three years so I can do very big project. That’s not the case because I have one year to do the whole thing.

Jonathan: And whilst I’m happy and I enjoy the area that I’m researching there is always that question of, with more time could I have developed it in greater detail and refined certain elements, because I do want to keep my passion going with the course.
Margie: I heard that a bit in what you were saying that if I stay up till midnight or stay up till 1.00am, but what I heard in that is you’d be doing it all the time and you’d end up getting shattered, exhausted, probably ending up getting ill. I suppose it sounds very much like you’ve got to pace yourself sensibly to get it done, but if you’re behind in your head, whether you are or not, I can imagine that being a challenge.

Jenny: What can be difficult about it is that because there are no set deadlines really around it that you end up all at very different stages of research. And if it’s taking a bit longer, which mine has, then it can feel really anxiety provoking that everyone else is a bit further on and you’re like feeling like you’re falling behind at the same time it does mean everybody will end up at different points I think really as well.

Janice highlights the difference, in terms of time allocation, between a traditional PhD and the trainee counselling psychologist doctorate. She argues that there is a limited time for trainee counselling psychologists due to the inclusion of other assignments which means that students must complete their project in one year, as opposed to PhD students being allocated three years. Jonathan realises the effect that time constraints can have on the quality of his work. He wonders whether being under pressure to finish in a specific time can lead to his feeling less passionate about the project and his ability to develop certain areas further. Margie refers to the effects that time constraints can have on the lifestyle and health of students. She mentions that students often stay up late in order to complete assignments, which can lead to further problems and stress.

Jenny expressed concern that deadlines create more pressure and the difficulty to manage these. Jenny, interestingly, notes that what is difficult for her is the lack of deadlines set by the university. The thought of being behind on her work invokes feelings of anxiety. The lack of deadlines means that she has to set her own personal targets, which makes her compare her progress to that of others. Hala and Jenny raised a concern on the pressure of meeting deadlines. Under this pressure, Hala felt it difficult to dedicate more time to her thesis and maintain a clear focus on its progress. Jenny, on the other hand, is afraid to fall behind and this further provokes anxiety. Jonathan and Margie felt that time constraints were a major problem. In Jonathan’s case, it was detrimental to the quality of his work and for Margie it affected her health. Mark, Jonathan and Janice all considered the amount of assignments to be excessive. Mark and Jonathan felt that more time should be allocated, whereas Janice suggested that it would be beneficial to incorporate the assignments into the thesis.
Most doctoral students struggle with negative experiences caused by heavy workload, managing deadlines and lack of support (Cole et al., 2010). This shows the rigorous process of undertaking a doctoral thesis and doctoral students must be cautious in managing their time. Koszegi (2000) states that when students overcommit and try to take on numerous tasks, they actually fail to progress. Silvera (2000) reiterates this by explaining that when students are busy taking on various tasks, they can hinder themselves. Furthermore, Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) suggest that PhD students frequently reported that their disengagement was caused by the demand of managing the workload of writing reports, paperwork, data collection and analysis.

Wisker and Robinson (2013) reported that students had difficulty managing time due to having other commitments and this led to them expressing feelings of confusion. However, this confusion was not manifested in the case for participants who had difficulty in time management but they conformed to McLeod (2003), who suggested that undertaking a thesis is complex because it involves substantial time and commitment. Another study by Golden et al. (2005) investigated the experiences of PhD counselling students and found time management and balance of work was a struggle. This studies illustrates the difficulty in trying to manage the workload when under time pressure and how this hinders progress on the thesis.

**Difficulty in deciding research topic**

One of the first steps of writing a doctoral thesis is selecting an interesting topic. This is not always a simple or a straightforward process. There were participants who mentioned feeling uncertain about their research or their thesis topic and how this became an obstacle in completing their thesis. Furthermore, some participants found that this uncertainty resulted in their developing a lack of interest in their research. The following are some quotes that demonstrate this.

Paulette: *If I was choosing a research topic now it would be completely different to the one that I chose right at the beginning of the training we were asked to commit to a topic. It would be a very different choice and that’s quite regrettage for me. So I’m not sort of very much in love with my research topic and, yeah, but it’s too late to change it.*

Jenny: *I guess the first main difficulty that you kind of come up against is you have your idea of what you would like… your topic that you would like to research. But within that then there becomes a*
whole realm of different constraints that are placed upon whether that is a viable project or not to take.

Margie: I felt in the first year a little pressurised to come up with an idea relatively quickly. This, again, all of a sudden you’re on this oh gosh, you know, I’ve just started a course and I’ve got to decide what I’ve got to focus on.

Paulette: So it’s a little bit like I was saying about choosing the topic, coming at the wrong time for me, it doesn’t feel very... My research topic doesn’t feel very relevant right now to what I’m doing and what I normally would.

Paulette comments on how, as time has passed, she feels differently about her research topic. She even admits that if she had the option of selecting again, she would choose differently. Furthermore, she expresses doubt about the relevance of her topic. These doubts arise from the fact that she was required to choose a topic at a time when she was not ready. Regarding the topic of her research, she has not chosen something that she is passionate about and has concerns that her topic is no longer relevant, due to new developments in the profession. Margie also supports this by reporting that she felt pressurised to develop an idea. The lack of time can develop an uncertainty regarding the topic, as they do not have sufficient time to ponder more thoroughly what their research will entail, and by the time they realise the limitations in their research, it is too late.

Jenny also appears to have doubts about her research topic, as she is uncertain about where it will lead to or what problems may occur during the process. This uncertainty is brought about by a lack of preparedness or foresight about any methodological or ethical obstacles that she may encounter. As with the previous participants, there is a time constraint, as by the time any obstacles arise, it is too late to change her topic. Paulette, Jenny and Margie found there was insufficient time to make a decisive selection. This resulted in a choice of topic which subsequently led to a lack of interest, commitment and a sense of regret. Hakesever and Manisali (2000) and Nightingale (2005) reported that students can develop anxiety due to the lack of guidance in their choice of topic. The selection of topic is one of the initial steps in undertaking a research and lack of guidance in this area may lead to disinterest and lack of motivation in completing the thesis. This conflicts with the evidence that participants felt a lack of motivation but no signs of anxiety. Manathunga (2002) alternatively suggested that a change in research topic was a sign of self-sabotage and a pretext for procrastination.
Subcategory 3: Personal difficulties

Most participants narrated instances of personal difficulties they experienced whilst completing their thesis. What is interesting about them is that they can differ from student to student and affect each one in different ways. The extensive list of concepts described by the participants as personal difficulties consists of procrastination, unexpected circumstances, lack of interest and motivation, maintaining self-care, lack of experience, lack of confidence in writing, social isolation, difficulty in integrating research and practice, difficulty in balancing academics, personal life and family responsibility. These will be presented below with extracts of participants’ quotes.

Procrastination

The concept ‘procrastination’ was raised by a few participants. It was explained that this was a major struggle in trying to complete a thesis. It was not only a challenge in that it hindered the completion of the thesis but it also brought about additional feelings of guilt and disappointment at different stages of the thesis. The following are some examples that demonstrate the issue of procrastination:

Linda: ...maybe some people that are bloody good at mindfulness might be able to properly focus on the moment or whatever, but for me it’s really hard to have a good time or anything while this is still there. I have issues with procrastination, so that feeds into the guilt more. If you’re better at working it might not be that bad.

Paulette: this big research…it makes it easier for me to put it out of my mind and kind of shelve it for a while, you know, oh, I’m waiting for the university to come back to me with... So I kind of use that in an unhelpful way, sort of allowing me to put it off.

Travis: I had the attitude in the first year that you’re talking about; I need a block of time. And I would’ve told myself that all the time. I need two weeks straight, take days off just to write. But in reality I don’t have that time. So spending... it’s amazing what I can do in an hour. I get freaked out and I procrastinate over those hours. Or I like just feel full of anxiety.

Linda, Paulette and Travis all disclose that they have procrastinated at some point during the process of trying to complete a doctoral thesis. Linda opens up about her issues of procrastination. She feels that the thesis is a burden and does not allow herself to take personal time until she has completed her thesis. She associates procrastination with feelings
of guilt, which then leads to further anxieties relating to her thesis. For Linda, procrastination introduces further issues that make the thesis become even more difficult to complete. On the other hand, Paulette’s procrastination is not personal; she procrastinates due to a lack of feedback from her supervisor. Her procrastination is linked to external factors, as opposed to an internal need to do it. Travis focuses on specific time periods that he believes he needs to make progress with his thesis. It is this focus that then leads him to procrastinate and not utilise the time efficiently. He appears to focus too much on the importance of time, which then leads to him experiencing a sense of worry and guilt.

The issue of procrastination was a significant problem faced by Linda, Paulette and Travis. Linda, who has a history of procrastination, feels guilty and anxious when she does not dedicate herself to the thesis. Paulette finds the whole process daunting and tries to delay working on the thesis. She also admits that getting delayed feedback from supervisors allows her to procrastinate further. Travis procrastinates by convincing himself that insufficient time was a reason for his behaviour, which leads him to panic and feel anxious. Numerous studies show that procrastination is present amongst doctoral students (Ellis & Knaus, 1977; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984; Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Martin et al., 2003; Ahern & Manathuga, 2004). A study done by Kluever (1997) focused on procrastination amongst PhD students and found that it often led to feelings of guilt and stress which is consistent with the participants in the focus groups. This clearly indicates how procrastination can be a major hindrance towards completing a doctoral thesis.

**Unexpected circumstances**

Some participants described having experienced unexpected circumstances that hindered or continue to hinder their progress in completing their thesis. These involve sudden or unexpected challenges which are out of the students’ control and can cause uncertainty. Below are some of examples of those:

Gracie: *I am aware that my personal circumstances have constructed a very different level of pressure for me over the past three years. My mother was terminally ill and I was her caregiver, during the time my mother was in the end-stage of her disease my brother died very suddenly only two weeks post diagnosis of a rare genetic lung diseases. I needed to take time out of clinical practice and from my research. Re-engaging with the topic of depression and suicide whilst grieving the deaths of my mother and brother is very difficult for me. The biggest challenge during this thesis journey has been coping with the very real and difficult emotions of seeing my mother’s decline, her*
dying and death and the sudden death of my brother. In this respect, the personal has also been professional.

Linda: My supervisors swapped partway through the process and that was quite frightening because they have quite different views about the order of things, chapters you do and stuff, and I’ve found it very difficult to trust in some ways my new supervisor because I knew the other supervisor had a different idea.

Gracie’s experiences are an example of how unexpected personal circumstances can affect the progress of the doctoral thesis. It appears that Gracie experienced significant life-changing events during her course, which included family bereavements. These unforeseeable events caused disruption to her progress as she was required to take time away from practice and research. There are often events or experiences for which one cannot prepare and can often trigger hurtful emotions which affect the progress of the degree. Linda’s experiences show that unexpected circumstances can not only be in the students’ personal lives, but occurrences caused by the university. The changing of supervisors during the process was an unforeseeable change that caused her distress and added pressure on the writing of her thesis. Myers (1999) contended that students involved in unexpected incidents were usually affected negatively, causing them to feel distressed and to fall behind in their thesis. Appel and Dahlgren (2003) conducted a study which revealed that doctoral students often face unexpected circumstances, such as personal tragedies and life experiences that can distract the student.

Lack of interest and motivation

Some participants reported that the process of undertaking a thesis did not interest them and, as a result, they developed a lack of motivation to complete the thesis, which was then regarded as a challenge in trying to complete their thesis. Interestingly, the following dialogue between two participants shows that a lack of interest in either subject or research in general can lead to a lack of motivation and, therefore, overall progress.

Athena: No, I’m just totally not interested in it. No desire to do it really no matter what topic. I’m just not bothered really. Because I’ll try to find something that I’m a bit interested in but it’s just not for me. It’s just not something that I can ever really get excited about. I hate learning about like… I just find it really really dry, all the different analysis.
James: So in that sense doing my research I don’t think is something which I’m going to fully enjoy and I know it’s going to be a pain in the neck for most of the time which I’m doing it. But I know it’s what I need to do in order to get to where I want to be if that makes sense.

Athena: My attitude is very similar to that. Research is not my thing, I just don’t like it. And I still have some feelings about like it shouldn’t be even part of the course. So I might actually enjoy like the information that the interviews give me and looking at that. But generally I just don’t like it at all.

Athena openly expresses a complete lack of interest in completing the doctoral thesis. She insists that, no matter what the topic is, she has no motivation to research one any further and finds the process dull and exhausting. James supports this opinion, further adding that he is only pursuing completion of the doctoral thesis due to its being a compulsory element of the course. In addition to this, the following quote provides an example of a trainee counselling psychologist who struggles to balance all of the work and, therefore, identifies that motivation is a key in order to stay on track and progress with the thesis.

Isabel: Just can’t imagine... like the level of motivation you’d need to really keep that up, that really long and lonely road isn’t it. It’s hard to balance. So you’re kind of got it on your agenda and done it and then it can take quite a long time for it to come back. So then it’s like to get that motivation back you have to try and pick it up again.

Isabel expresses her concern about the level of motivation that is needed to complete a doctoral course and further describes the journey as a solitary one. She asserts that motivation can waver throughout the course and is afraid that this may hinder her progress. Some participants were honest in admitting their lack of interest in their thesis and only regarded it as a requirement of the course. Lonka et al. (2008) conducted a study during which they found that students who expressed a lack of interest and motivation were more likely to abandon their studies.

**Maintaining self-care**

Some participants expressed their concern about self-care in the process of completing their thesis. Maintaining self-care is essential for trainee counselling psychologists as a strong mental and emotional focus is required to carry out the thesis. If self-care is neglected, this can lead to increased levels of stress and even a desire to abandon the course altogether. The
following are quotes from the focus groups, which show participants’ concerns about self-care.

Mark: But also finding time for doing something for yourself as well. Self-care I suppose you could say. I think finding the right balance to that is a difficult thing to do.

Natalie: For me, the biggest challenge is about not letting it affect your mental health...as people working with people with mental health problems we do need to be modelling self-care, and it’s just been the biggest challenge for me in terms of self-care, as well as choosing my project.

Margie: What I give to the course sometimes, not all the time, I can perceive as taking away and almost even a self-care challenge. Last night I walked through the door at 9.00pm “Mum, mum, mum, can you sign this” and you’re thinking oh guys, I just walked through the door. That can be really quite a challenge emotionally and for your energy.

Travis: So self-care can be kind of a big issue. But again it’s something personal to me.

Natalie: So I wonder if there’s something about how you design the project is also kind of showing your own sense of self-care. It’s a way of looking after yourself because an ambitious project will take up a lot of time and like no one is paying you for that... it’s almost a way of looking after yourself in some ways.

Different participants viewed self-care in different ways. For Mark, self-care requires finding the appropriate time, amongst all other priorities, to do something for oneself. It is important to find a balance between self-care and work commitments. For Natalie, her concerns are primarily related to mental health and how, in counselling psychology, trainees are models of self-care. She suggests there is extra pressure as she is expected to be a role model for people who have difficulty with self-care or other mental health issues. Margie expressed deep concerns about the fact that it is hard to relax and find time for herself. This is due to her feeling the pressures of family responsibility and other commitments. She feels how she has to live up to her children’s expectations, which increases the pressure. Both Margie and Travis refer to the issue of self-care as being a personal challenge and both label this issue as important, although it can differ depending on the person.

Natalie further addresses how the specifics of the course and the profession can increase the likeliness that one can neglect to take care of oneself. She points out that by choosing a particularly challenging and time-consuming topic, perhaps a topic such as depression, students are creating a more stressful and demanding task for themselves and this can lead to neglect of the self, both mentally and physically. Mark and Margie felt that finding time
to self-care was a challenge. Mark finds it difficult to balance everything, whereas Margie finds it emotionally draining having to manage other areas of her life. Natalie was worried about neglecting self-care and how this may affect her mental state. Travis on the other hand finds self-care as a personal challenge. Nurmi and Salmela-Aro (2002) suggested that maintaining self-care can have more positive effects in their studies and can lead to success in their future careers. Therefore it is essential for doctoral students to be aware of different ways of maintaining self-care as the doctoral thesis is time-consuming and involves emotional work.

**Lack of experience**

Some participants gave an account of their lack of experience in the different aspects that were involved in completing a doctoral programme. The doctoral programme welcomes a diverse range of students from different backgrounds. This often means that students have varying levels of experiences related to counselling psychology. The following are some of the quotes that show participants talking about their lack of experience and how they felt this hindered them in acquiring their doctoral degree.

Janice: *It’s a shame we’re not getting that chance as part of the training to actually go and do something meaningful that might change things in psychology.*

Penny: *I haven’t got any experience yet in my doctoral thesis.*

Armand: *It’s remembering we are learning. We’re not actually qualified and qualified researchers, so we’re here still to learn and keep learning from, not mistakes, but choices that you know in the future not to make or experiences that will shape choices you make in future as well. It’s good having third and second years because people report things that I care and stuff like that.*

Penny: *It has been really nice to hear the experiences where you’re at the moment. That’s been a really helpful thing for me to be more realistic and know what’s coming in.*

Janice emphasises the lack of experience the doctoral programme is offering her and how this can negatively affect her ability to achieve in the profession. She appears to feel dissatisfied with the opportunity the course is giving her and shows her value of experience by expressing a desire to have more in order to do something productive. Penny appears to not have any experience in her doctoral thesis. There is a possibility she is new to the course that could explain her lack of experience. She believes that when she has learned more she
will begin to appreciate the importance of experiences in the doctoral thesis. Armand identifies a lack of experience in his work but he does not let this negatively affect him.

He is eager to learn from any mistakes he makes and is willing to utilise the experiences of his peers in order to further his own academic progress. Janice, Penny and Armand reported about their lack of experience and how they felt this was an impediment in acquiring their doctoral degree. Janice felt that the course could offer more guidance to help her progress and gain more knowledge. Penny admits that she is new to the course and therefore does not have any experience. She appears not to be open. Armand acknowledges his lack of experiences but this stimulates his goal to gain more knowledge and learn from others. Herman (2010) and Manathunga (2005) both carried out studies that express that doctoral students often suppress their emotions. Penny’s thoughts and feelings are consistent with this. Maher et al. (2014) carried out a study examining the challenges encountered by novice doctoral students, identifying lack of experience and self-doubt. Schaufeli et al. (2002) revealed that it is common for doctoral students to feel an initial sense of incompetence. It is a general problem for doctoral students in the early stages of the course but usually subsides as the students gain more experience. Jairam and Kahl (2012) further posit that lack of support and experience may account for this.

**Lack of confidence in writing**

A more concrete personal difficulty, compared to the general aspect of lack of experience, is lack of confidence in writing a doctoral thesis. Writing is clearly a vital part of the thesis. The following are some quotes that illustrate the lack of confidence that students have in their own writing whilst trying to complete a doctoral thesis.

Elaine: *For me it’s about writing, making sure I hit each heading and get everything in there, and get my head around producing this piece of work. I guess my experience is having to push for details and also having to really sit down and think a lot about what I wanted to do and how I was going to structure it. It’s very time consuming. So the passion is important but as you get on into the task it’s just bloody boring.*

Leslie: *I really like research. I think it’s a lot of work and so I’m not really looking forward to writing up my thesis very much. But I think the actual study is going to be fine, I just don’t know about the writing part. And that’s an art in itself being able to do that because I’m not very good at that. So I’m kind of complex and you can see that in my assignments. It’s very hard for me to focus on that, a simple thing... I’m not saying... I’m not a great writer, I’m not very clear; I’m not very good at it.*
Travis: But so that’s the process that makes me anxious rather than... There’s anxiety around writing a thesis for me but it’s not about whether I can do it or not, it’s the process of it.

Elaine stresses the importance of producing a structured piece of work, the basis of which concerns her. It is a time-consuming process. She feels that in order to write successfully, it is necessary to have a passion for it. If not, the writing task becomes dull and not completed as effectively. Leslie expresses doubt about her own writing skills. She reports that she enjoys the research process but struggles with the actual writing component of the thesis. What is important to note here is that, due to her lack of self-confidence in her writing ability. Travis differs in that he does not doubt his own ability to write, but the management of the process of writing a thesis. He appears to show confusion about the process and this creates feelings of anxiety. Evidently, no matter how successful the student is in the research stage of the process, if there is a lack of confidence in their writing it can have a negative impact, as they do not believe they have the ability to convey what they have found in the research.

Writing is an integral part of the process, having self-doubts in this area can cause serious problems. Elaine regarded writing as a time consuming process. She admits that she is a perfectionist and feels anxious if her work is not of a high standard. Leslie lacks confidence in writing even before she begins, and has developed negative thoughts giving rise to anxiety making it difficult to start. Travis feels that the process of completing the thesis is difficult to manage which makes him lose confidence and become anxious about his writing ability. Moore (2003) addressed the notion of writer’s block and how it can lead to writers failing to meet personal targets, resulting in anxiety and panic. Grant and Knowles (2000) acknowledge that negative self-talk and self-doubts can lead to further anxiety. This clearly explains how the negative thinking of Elaine, Leslie and Travis may have increased their anxiety and impeded their progress. This shows that writing is not as easy process as it involves various stages which can be overwhelming often involves a substantial amount of time to concentrate.

Social isolation

Social isolation was identified in the focus groups as a negative consequence of writing the thesis. It can be something that can develop during the process where a participant becomes isolated and focuses on the thesis; this focus, however, is hampered by the lack of social interactions and can lead to further issues regarding the mental wellbeing and self-care of
the doctoral students. The issue of social isolation was not specifically identified by the participants themselves but their actions suggested that they were suffering from some form of it.

Margie: *Sometimes that’s a challenge with me as well that other people that don’t do this just don’t understand. When you say I haven’t got five minutes, they think you’re … I think some people can take it personally and I have come across that. “What do you mean you haven’t?” I really, really haven’t got time. And I don’t … or they don’t understand the amount of stress, friends and family members. I would say there’s not always understanding there, which can cause quite a lot of frustration and hurt at times.*

Natalie: *I suppose my challenge in doing this doctorate and the thesis is making sure that I don’t go completely into my shell…*

Jonathan: *I can only speak from my pre-emptive position. I’m not in there with it yet. Maybe it’s different for our programme, but a big one is the feeling of being isolated while writing the thesis is a big thing that comes up for me. Am I going to lose my mind in the third year and be sat in darkness writing this thesis hour after hour, toiling away endlessly.*

Jonathan: *It was two challenges for me. I think we touched on them in different ways but there is that balancing things because at the moment it already feels like everything is arranged in an order, everything is prioritised, and I don’t have much time, and friends have to book an appointment, and in the third year it’s “I’m sorry, I’ll call you in a year. October is full right now.”*

Margie reflects upon her experience of finding it difficult to receive empathy from family and friends in regards to her thesis. She feels that her loved ones lack understanding on how demanding the process of writing a thesis is and their reactions often bring feelings of guilt. It appears that her experience with the thesis is a personal one but she feels she cannot share this with others, as they will not understand. Natalie foresees that social isolation could be problematic. She identifies that trainee counselling psychologists completing a thesis can become withdrawn into themselves and she sees how this could be a negative effect from and on the thesis as a whole.

Similar to the feelings of Natalie, Jonathan also has pre-emptive anxiety about becoming socially isolated in the future. He is aware that the thesis is a demanding task and that it is possible to be drawn into it until the point where he becomes solitary in his lifestyle and his work. He develops a strategy in order to ensure successful completion of his thesis. He values his time and knows that he must dedicate himself entirely to the thesis. However, consequently, he appears to be isolating his friends by not sparing any time for them. Margie
feels sad that her family does not understand the demanding nature of her thesis and feels guilty for not being able to enlighten them. She is unable to share ideas about her thesis with anyone and finds the process lonely.

Natalie and Jonathan appear to agree that writing a thesis will be a solitary experience. Natalie, however, determines that she will not allow herself to be completely isolated whereas Jonathan believes that isolating himself is the only strategy to successfully complete his thesis. Muszyski and Akamatsu (1991) found that students can often feel lonely, particularly during the holidays as they are away from their family members. However, there was no suggestion of this by the trainee counselling psychologists. Burkard et al. (2013) suggest that social isolation occurred due to a lack of academic guidance while undertaking a thesis. This again was not apparent for the focus groups. Pargetter (2000) identified that isolation can lead to a lack of progress which causes further problems such as stress and even more isolation. There are many studies that show that PhD students feel isolated as they are required to carry out more independent learning (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 2005; Pyhalto, Stubb & Lonka, 2009). It is evident from the focus groups that social isolation among doctoral students in counselling psychology exists, but to a lesser degree.

**Difficulty in integrating research and practice**

The integration of research and practice is an essential requirement in training to become a counselling psychologist. Some participants found incorporating both research and practice components as a challenge. The following quotes are representative of this struggle:

Chloe: Yes, the challenges, yes. Something about kind of well, what about people teaching us and how do you kind of see that. For me that’s challenge, is that I kind of... I want to be taught by people who link their research to their practice every day. And if that doesn’t... if I didn’t see that it makes it harder for me to do that myself.

Natalie: I think that comes with the territory. I think I applied for this course because I wanted that. I struggle with it because it’s very hard to relate research to clinical practice, but the way I see it is that we’re not ... if we just wanted to be counsellors we wouldn’t be here, so this is almost part of the package.

Chloe found it challenging to simultaneously balance both research and practice components. She feels that there is a lack of direction or guidance set for her by the tutors. She emphasises the importance of having a role model to demonstrate how this integration should be done. Natalie describes how this combination of the two components is integral in
the counselling psychology profession. She reveals that her motivation for joining the course was this integral aspect, but divulges that she finds it a challenge to do so. She further explains that the integration is part of the identity of trainee counselling psychologists and must be expected when joining the course. When one fails to do so, it creates uncertainty in forming an identity as a trainee counselling psychologist. Integrating research and practice is essential for trainee counselling psychologists as it enables them to form an identity. Chloe and Natalie found this to be complex. Chloe felt this was due to the lack of guidance by the tutor and suggested that having a role model would have been helpful. Natalie was more aware of this process, willing to learn and said it was important in shaping her identity. Some trainee counselling psychologists reported difficulties in integrating, as it is rarely implemented effectively (Richardson, 2009). This is in line with Morgeson et al. (2005) who found that some of the challenges in this area were due to the complexity of its application.

Some of the participants in the focus groups considered developing their identity as a difficulty in integrating research and practice. Part of forming the identity requires trainee counselling psychologists to pay close attention to the research, practice and completing a doctoral thesis. Following are some quotes that illustrate this concept:

Chloe: Because this is a very new baby profession and it’s very difficult having to create an identity. I think we forget that even though we’re adults this is a new profession and we need something to grab onto sometimes. There is a pressure on us as well.

Chloe: One of the challenges is I find that maybe like role models on the training course to kind of promote that link between research and practice. And I don’t know if it’s because we’re a new course, but I just noticed that there’s… for me I think I’m at the stage where I need role models. I want to think, okay, right, I want to practice like that person or be like that person. And having so many external speakers and I guess having tutors who are more academics than practitioners, I’m struggling to find that model I think.

James: It sounds almost, and this is probably me putting something onto what you’re saying, in that when we introduce ourselves as either a student counselling psychologist or a training counselling psychologist.

Chloe stresses the point that counselling psychology is a relatively new profession and draws attention to the fact that it is this reason that means it can be difficult for trainee counselling psychologists to establish their own identities within this specific field. She also emphasises the huge impact developing one’s identity as a trainee counselling psychologist can have on the progress of the thesis and the professional development. She further states she struggles
to find a role model or framework that allows her to shape her identity. She feels it is especially important to have a role model to be able to establish her identity as a trainee counselling psychologist who can implement both practice and research components of the course. She acknowledges that even though they are adults, they still need some sort of guidelines. James expresses concerns with the categorisation of his role. He is not sure how to introduce himself and struggles to form an identity between student and training. He appears to be experiencing a dilemma concerning this issue.

The conflict that Chloe and James experienced was consistent with the findings of Denicolo and Pope (1994), who outlined the multiple roles and responsibilities a student must assume in order to complete their research. This balance is imperative in the study of counselling psychology due to the excessive demand of theory, research, practice and other external roles. Failure to achieve this balance can increase stress and anxiety levels. Attention has been given to specific aspects of research doctoral student learning affecting confidence, including identity development and role confusion (Jazvac-Martek, 2009), and the complexity of the doctoral experience (Beauchamp, et al., 2009). This clearly shows the complexity of balancing multiple roles and responsibilities that doctoral students must manage in order to alleviate stress.

**Difficulty in balancing academics, personal life and family responsibility**

A number of participants narrated the difficulty of balancing their personal life, academic and completing a thesis. Other commitments outside of the thesis and the doctoral programme can include part-time work, family and socialising. One highlighted theme that appears to emerge in the group discussion was family responsibility. The following quotes can be interpreted as participants expressing difficulty in balancing their personal lives and work.

Linda: *Balancing everything work, money, family commitments, whatever anyone has, placements and assignments. It’s a huge list.*

Jenny: *And demonstrating resilience as well in all of the balancing, the juggling, keeping it all going. But we’re not at the end of it yet so I can’t say for sure.*

Elaine: *We more or less talked about challenge like, so I have a family so that brings specific challenges. It depends on what the rest of your life looks like. So you’ve got family and it just makes ... the balance is harder.*
Penny: *There’s that personal element in it as well. My research is without a doubt going to impact on my family life. I think it’s going to impact on many different areas of my life, professional, personal really.*

Margie: *Last night I walked through the door at 9.00pm “Mum, mum, mum, can you sign this” and you’re thinking oh guys, I just walked through the door. That can be really quite a challenge emotionally and your energy. I’m always doing something. I’ve always got responsibility for something, for someone, for something for the course and that sort of thing.*

Linda raises the issue and concern of how she balances carrying out her thesis with other aspects of her personal life. She further extends this issue by pointing out that it is a universal theme, with every doctoral student having some form of commitment in their respective personal lives. Jenny remains determined in her efforts to balance her personal life and studies. However, she expresses doubt in that, as she has not yet completed her doctoral thesis, she is unsure whether the resilience that she shows will be sufficient to successfully complete the task. Despite Jenny having doubts about how she will maintain this balance, she demonstrates a strong character and positivity, something which appears to be essential in order to successfully achieve the desired stability.

Elaine further explores the issue of work-life balance by stressing that the balance can be compromised even more by having family obligations. It is not something that she can shy away from and it can bring further challenges that turn the search for balance between home and work life even more of a struggle. Penny is upfront about the effect of her research on her family life. She acknowledges that it will have an important effect on this aspect of her life. She almost admits to making a sacrifice in this sense, where she knows that, in order to gain in her academic life, she must compromise on other areas of her life such as her family and personal life.

Margie specifically identifies her struggle as both a trainee counselling psychologist and as a mother. She cannot simply switch off when she arrives home, often late, and must then cater to her family needs. She must devote herself to both commitments, which can make it difficult to give fair attention to either. This leads to the difficulty that trainees have in balancing academics, personal life and family responsibility. Linda, Jenny, Elaine, Penny and Margie found that balancing their lives in the areas of family, job, personal and professional was a struggle. Some of the examples being described by them are finding time for their thesis, assignments and having a job. Elaine and Margie found that family was the most challenging aspect. The literature indicates that women are more likely than men to
find conducting a thesis stressful (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Toews et al., 1993, 1997; Ulku-Steiner, et al., 2000). The focus groups showed this to be the case. In addition to this, Etherington (2000) describes how other commitments and personal challenges can lead to disruptions in the process of undertaking a doctoral degree.

Subcategory 4: Lack of communication

A further subcategory that was identified which was seen as an interference in the process of writing a thesis was lack of communication. This was identified in the participants’ discussions and was often between the participants and the university. Concepts developed under this category are ineffective supervisory relationship, delay in feedback and problems with university guidelines. These will be described below.

Ineffective supervisory relationship

The strength of the supervisor-student relationship can determine the success and completion of the thesis. Some participants described their experiences of having an ineffective supervisor that can lead to the completion of thesis being delayed or difficult. The following are some of the quotes that illustrate participants talking about their experience of having an ineffective supervisor and how this can hinder the process.

Linda: My supervisors swapped partway through the process and that was quite frightening because they have quite different views about the order of things, chapters you do and stuff, and I’ve found it very difficult to trust in some ways my new supervisor because I knew the other supervisor had a different idea, and all I had in my head was whose idea is it going to be in the viva when they’re seeing the results of this.

Paulette: Another challenge that I’m just thinking of is the supervisory relationship. We don’t get any choice or the supervisor isn’t... the supervisors are all quite different. And trying to just manage that relationship to get what you need from it and get the help that you need I think is quite difficult for us.

Natalie: I felt like I was pressured in my first year, and beyond that I thought I was pressured to do something that my supervisor also supported, but maybe that’s just me.

As well as being an unexpected circumstance, Linda’s experience led her to have difficulty in trusting a new supervisor when suddenly assigned a new one. She became conflicted as to whom she should trust and whose guidelines to follow in regards to ideas and
recommended methodology. This shows how a lack of a consistent supervisory relationship can lead to confusion about the thesis, which can lead to the student experiencing doubts about the process as a whole. Paulette identifies managing the supervisory relationship as a challenge. She acknowledges that each supervisor is different and can either be suited to or clash with different students. The fact that there is no choice is an important factor in this relationship meaning there is a lack of control on the student’s part. The differences in the personalities of the supervisors can even affect how the students’ needs are met and the amount of help given. Interestingly, Natalie felt pressurised in her first year to progress with an idea that her supervisor wanted and it is unclear whether she also agreed with this. It is also uncertain whether she is progressing with an idea for her thesis simply to appease her supervisor and not because she has chosen or is passionate about the subject.

This can then lead to a lack of interest, as previously discussed, and in the area selected which can be a hindrance in the overall progress of the thesis. Linda had a change of supervisor part way through her thesis. This resulted in her feeling confused by the different views of the two supervisors. Paulette’s anxiety was around managing the supervisory relationship and was worried that she may not receive the best guidance since she had no choice in the selection of her supervisor. Natalie felt pressured by her supervisor to undertake a research area that is of less interest to her. Although this may be a problem for trainee counselling psychologists, it is essential to hear the perspective of the supervisor as it involves a two-way relationship. Elmholdt (2003) identified that the principal problem students experience in postgraduate studies is an inefficient supervisory relationship. Students feeling neglected by their supervisors sense ‘stuckness’ which undermines confidence and prevents progress (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). Pyhalto et al. (2012) directly addressed a lack of supervision affecting progress. It is evident that the supervisor plays a vital role and it is essential to develop an effective relationship because the supervisory relationship determines the completion of the thesis.

**Delay in feedback**

For many trainee counselling psychologists, feedback is an important aspect in order to progress and improve the quality of the work that they produce. It can ease any worries or mental blocks that the students experience. The following are some quotes that illustrate the frustration experienced when there was a delay in feedback.
Jenny: If they’re very busy not being sure what’s a reasonable kind of timeframe or that sort of thing to ask them to work within, can leave you again waiting for very long periods of time really. Just waiting to hear back from them can be very frustrating. Balancing their commitments obviously as well. If they’re very busy not being sure what’s a reasonable kind of timeframe or that sort of thing to ask them to work within, can leave you again waiting for very long periods.

Paulette: Because, oh, they’re not replying to me, I can’t do anything. And they don’t reply, you know, like it’s days and days go by, you know, without replies to emails. Or it might be weeks, yes. And that is quite difficult. And then you can become angry and resentful. And obviously that kind of challenges the whole project.

Isabel: Yes, and I think it’s the thing of when you are in a position to do something, because you have received replies, then have you actually then got time… or has that reply come at a time when unfortunately there’s loads of other commitments that are really pressing.

Jenny identifies specific challenges regarding delays in feedback. At times when students are stuck and need guidance in order to progress with their thesis, waiting for a reply or feedback from university staff, in particular their respective supervisor, can be frustrating. She feels that it is nearly impossible to progress and this becomes a hindrance in her work as well as creating added stress. She acknowledges that supervisors also have further commitments but suggests that this can limit the amount of time dedicated to overseeing the thesis of the student. Similarly, Paulette underscores the worry that she feels when she does not receive a reply by email for many days. She expresses how she can be at a standstill and may not be able to progress her research at all. Isabel raises the issue of the timing of the feedback. For Isabel, when she does receive feedback, it is not always at a suitable time. She feels that, due to the demanding nature of the degree programme, the feedback can fail to coordinate with other aspects of the degree programme. She must balance her time and other components of the course in order to successfully use the feedback.

For many trainee counselling psychologists, receiving delayed feedback was a significant issue. Jenny, Paulette and Isabel all experienced unhelpful emotions such as stress and worry due to the delayed feedback. Jenny felt frustrated and Paulette felt both angry and resentful because of waiting for feedback from their supervisor. On the other hand, Isabel raised the issue of the timing of the feedback as she has other commitments to consider. The issues raised are supported by the findings in the study by McAlpine and Paulson (2010) in which students reported the frustration that supervisors caused by unreturned emails, neglect and
dilatoriness. These delays may cause unnecessary difficulties and therefore unhelpful emotions such as frustration, resentment and feeling stuck in writing the thesis may occur.

Problems with university guidelines

The university guidelines caused problems for several participants and hence were an obstacle to completing a doctoral thesis. This can be seen below in the following extracts.

Jenny: *I think that feeds into the other major challenge is that often the course team and the university don’t... they’re set for it, if you like, in some ways. So what the university expects of us, like the sort of update itself where we’re at, that sort of thing, can be quite badly communicated into the course team, which then is obviously badly communicated to us.*

Jenny: *I think there is a lot of it that doesn’t feel within your control, a lot of the stuff that has to go through university sort of policy, that just takes that huge amount of time. And somewhere it has to be done, but it can really delay you and just put you off for a while.*

Paulette: *Yes, I think the slowness of the university to respond actually kind of it feeds into me... It’s the most uncomfortable, scary feeling, you know, this big research. And so it gives you sort of, I don’t know, it makes it easier for me to put it out of my mind and kind of shelve it for a while, you know, oh, I’m waiting for the university to come back to me with...*

Jenny believes that a lack of university guidelines is a major challenge. She appears to express feelings of disappointment about the communication received from the university. The communication is not clear and up-to-date. When there are problems of this manner, it can impede the progress of the thesis, as she is left uncertain about how to move on. Jenny also emphasises the point that a lot of their work must go through the policy of the university, something that can take a significant amount of time. The procedures that she must go through can halt the production of her thesis as she must often wait for a response or approval from the university.

Paulette further comments that the slowness of the university to respond is a hindrance and this can trigger other unhelpful emotions such as anxiety and fear. These emotions then make the management of the thesis difficult and can lead to a disruption in the process. Jenny expressed feelings of disappointment about the communication received from the university as it is not very clear and up to date. Paulette and Jenny found that it takes a significant amount of time for approval or responses from the university. Further, Paulette found that the response from the university is slow and this leads to procrastination which impedes on
her thesis. Van de Schoot (2013) carried out a study looking at the causes of delays in doctoral students’ work and found that problems with university guidelines was one of the main issues. This supports the participants’ concerns that issues such as these are creating delays in the completion of their work.

4.3.2 Core Category 2: Positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis

The second core category that emerged from the focus groups was positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis. Despite many challenges faced by participants, undertaking a doctoral thesis has a positive perspective as well. This core category was evident as it was expressed by several participants from the focus groups. The following subcategories that were found are: acquiring new experiences, new opportunities, sense of achievement and creating a supportive network. The subcategories will be further explained below.

Subcategory 1: Acquiring new experiences

Some participants found that whilst undertaking a thesis, they gained new experiences that were seen as a positive aspect of writing the thesis. The following two concepts were identified as examples of when participants had acquired new experiences: understanding the scientist-practitioner model and developing new research skills.

Understanding the scientist-practitioner model

Participants identified the ability to comprehend the scientist-practitioner model more effectively as a positive concept of the thesis. The following are some quotes that illustrate the above concept:

Hala: But there’s something about the training that there’s a research component and there’s a clinical component. And they’re sort of learning about theory and research. And I guess in our course we felt more... well, I felt more of a sense of integration between those two, the theory and practice.

Jonathan: Both for me, opportunities for both and for them to evolve synergistically as well, the research that I do, the practice that I do. It feels it is a good opportunity for me to focus on this area of interest and develop a good understanding of it, so as a researcher and a practitioner it’s a critical part of the training.

Isabel: Yeah, it’s interesting. I don’t see... this is almost like research is an alternative to a clinical practice career.

Hala appears to have a positive outlook on the integration of theory and practice. She emphasises the practice that the training gives her and this is helpful towards successfully
completing the thesis. Jonathan sees the advantages of integrating both research and practice. He understands that it is important to have this balance and apply it in order to be successful in his field. For Isabel, the undertaking of the thesis and the research route is more of a priority for her. She believes that it is essential and can be an alternative path to a clinical career. Throughout the process of the thesis, all the above participants appear to have gained an understanding of the scientist-practitioner model. The understanding of this model contributes to establishing an identity as a researcher and results in a more productive thesis. This was identified as a useful experience by Hala, Jonathan and Isabel. Hala recognised how useful the model and its application will be for her future and her progress in writing the thesis. She gave positive feedback regarding these elements of the course and how beneficial the integration has been. It can be suggested that she finds this to be a valuable contribution not only to her thesis but to her sense of developing her identity. Jonathan gives similar positive feedback as he states how important the integration has been. Similarly, Jonathan reported that it allowed him to develop opportunities in both research and practice. He also remarked that the training of the course enabled him to be an effective researcher.

Additionally, both Hala and Jonathan demonstrate a sense of confidence they have acquired in the field of research. On the other hand, Isabel found the integration of both research and practice an interesting process as she views this method as an alternative to common practice. She appears to be happy with the structure of the course because it has allowed her to grow academically and professionally. Isabel prioritises research and recognises that this is a way to establish an identity as a scientist-practitioner. In addition, they realised that acquired knowledge is not only positive for their progress in the thesis, but also in their professional futures. The integration of the scientist-practitioner model is essential for doctoral students as outlined by Jones and Mehr (2007) who suggested that it requires a careful balance of practice and research. According to the study and the participants in the focus groups, acquiring knowledge and being able to apply this in both aspects is key in order to successfully carry out the thesis. Although Blair (2010) disputes the usefulness of the scientist-practitioner model, due to its complexity, it is interesting to see that participants reported that they comprehended the model and it was not seen as complex, but useful for everyday therapeutic practice. It was seen as a tool that enabled them to develop a wider understanding.
Developing new research skills

Participants found that undertaking their doctoral thesis gave them the opportunity to develop new research skills. The following quotes show participants and their development of these new skills.

James: The opportunity to develop a writing style. To become more proficient and I suppose eloquent in how you write things and put things forward and communicate things.

Todd: ...I felt enriched and more confident due to all the reading that I have undertaken and was able to understand the research literature much better and to look at it much more critically.

Paulette: You’ve got that skill now of being able to read research papers sort of quite quickly. You can work out if there’s anything in there that you want to know and to sort of maybe sort of evaluate it on various levels. And I think that in itself is quite a useful learning experience, doing the literature review, the hundreds of papers. So hopefully that’s a good part of it, a positive part of it.

Leslie: For some reason or other, I don’t know if this is my training or my research, but I find I’m more interested in actually getting involved with groups in the community, actually doing something with my knowledge

James found that one of the opportunities in undertaking a doctoral thesis was to develop his writing style. James found that undertaking a doctoral thesis had greatly improved his writing and communication skills. This clearly indicates how he has benefited from the process and advanced as a researcher. He relates this to the thesis where he has learnt to express himself in an academic and eloquent manner. He appears to be optimistic that this can be useful across all aspects of his course. Similarly, Todd believes that undertaking a thesis is an enriching process as he has developed confidence in reading and in his critical analysis skills. For him, it is a valuable experience that has enabled him to strengthen his skills. Paulette believes that a positive consequence of undertaking the thesis is the ability to develop critical and writing skills. She feels she can now evaluate things at a higher level, which is something she finds useful.

This can further expand her contribution to the research field and enhance her research as a whole. For Leslie, using the acquired research skills in a practical manner is important. Not only does she apply these skills to her thesis, but also sees them of valuable use in the community. All of the participants mentioned having a positive outlook on the skills that
can develop whilst undertaking a doctoral thesis. Furthermore, many participants agreed that undertaking a thesis opens up the opportunity to become a more reflective researcher. The following quotes show how the participants reflected on their development as a researcher:

Todd: *I realised the importance of research. Everything I read I related to my practice and experience. I found myself consistently reflecting on practice and vice versa.*

Hala: *I think it provides the platform for reflective practice and for working out where we are in terms of, you know, where we sit within this field of applied psychology generally and counselling psychology specifically.*

Isabel: *But I guess counselling psychology really embraces that reflective research aspect. I see it a bit for myself;*

Whilst carrying out the thesis, Todd appears to have developed an understanding of the value of research to the point at which he can apply all his knowledge to his own personal research. Hala identifies that undertaking the thesis provides a starting point to becoming a more reflective researcher. It gives her the ability to apply her thesis in the field of counselling psychology. Isabel strongly feels that counselling psychology embraces the reflective research aspects of the profession and, as a result, is more reflective in her doctoral thesis. A significant number of participants agreed that undertaking a thesis allowed them to develop new research skills. They reported that the process was insightful as it enabled them to be reflective researchers. Becoming a reflective researcher is crucial to the process of writing a thesis and to establishing their own identities in the field.

Todd acquired critical skills in researching literature in a scientific manner. In regard to developing new research skills he is able to integrate research and practice comfortably. He appreciates the value of research. Paulette shared similar views to Todd’s and she also gained confidence as a researcher and found completing her thesis was a useful learning curve and a positive aspect. She appears to be passionate about research and proudly states how she has acquired new skills in research. Leslie developed a new research skill that she could use to become involved in helping groups in a community. This enhances her prospects of employment, which is another positive aspect in undertaking a doctoral thesis. Participants that reported positive feelings may feel highly motivated which may result in successful completion of a thesis. A study that focused on the idea of reflective research was conducted by Gill and Hoppe (2009) who reported that participants felt they were developing their reflective and evaluative skills, which allowed them to progress in their doctorates. The study
echoes the sense of the awareness that the participants exhibited and how they used this as a positive experience in the process. Furthermore, Todd, Hala and Isabel agreed that undertaking a thesis opens up an opportunity to become a reflective researcher. Todd and Hala felt that it provided the platform for practice and research, whereas Isabel found she embraced the reflective aspects as shaping her identity as a researcher.

Todd, Hala and Isabel demonstrated their reflective ability and recognise that it is a crucial part of completing a thesis. These are examples of how new skills can be acquired during the process of undertaking the thesis and how they can minimalise the typical unhelpful emotions that participants often report. A study by Kiley and Wisker (2010) discussed the confidence and ownership of the project that participants gained whilst undertaking a thesis. The study also discussed how this enabled them to be more critical and creative in order to meet the standards of the doctoral journey. It is essential for doctoral students to be aware of the opportunities in undertaking a doctoral thesis as some of the processes involved may be enjoyable.

Subcategory 2: New opportunities
Several participants expressed their excitement of having access to new opportunities after completing their thesis. The following concepts were identified in the focus groups as potential opportunities that were viewed as promising by the participants: career prospects, specialising in a field and publishing.

Career prospects
Many participants hold that one of the opportunities that was opened up as a result of the thesis was the chance to start a career and progress within their chosen fields. The following quotes indicate that participants felt excitement regarding their future career prospects due to being in the progress of, or having completed, the doctoral thesis.

Paulette: *I suppose it’s possible that this experience will provide a platform for doing further research, better research in future. There’s a possibility, you know, if one’s career was going to go into that direction, working in universities. It provides a starting point doesn’t it?*

Mark: *Employment. I think you could strengthen an application for a job.*
Isabel: So for me, it provides me with a possible alternative line of thinking about future jobs. Not necessarily being a researcher in a research team in a big way or anything like that, but just working in an academic context where it needs to have some foot in some research pot even if it’s in a very low key doing a paper on X, Y, Z. I think for me it gives me a possible alternative route to... or an additional route maybe to being a clinical practitioner sort of possibility.

Natalie: The way I see it is you can start to bring the two together and I am really experiencing that at the moment where I feel like actually doing this thesis is really informing me in terms of just my job and my understanding of my job.

Paulette expressed feeling confident that completing the thesis would serve as a platform to carry out further research. She identifies that it can provide an advantageous starting point for a potential career in the research field, particularly in universities. Mark feels optimistic about finding a job and simultaneously building a career in research. He feels that the thesis and the doctoral programme are held in high esteem, high enough that it would strengthen a job application for him. Similar to Mark, Isabel strongly feels that completing the thesis will provide her with an advantage for future jobs. She suggests that the research component is not only useful for a career in research, but in other academic settings too. For Isabel, the completion of the thesis opens up new opportunities that are not exclusive to careers in research. Natalie acknowledges how research can help her understand her job better and what it is she wants to do. Her thesis is a learning curve for her where she can go on to apply what she has learnt in her field in a professional manner.

Paulette, Mark, Isabel and Natalie expressed their firm belief that a thesis enabled them to move forward in their careers and gave them new prospects for the future. Paulette appears to be optimistic about the future and explores the possibilities in various career paths. She is open in identifying this, as opposed to a vast majority of trainee counselling psychologists who do not pursue careers as researchers or lecturers. It could be said that Mark experiences fewer unhelpful emotions due to his optimism. It can be suggested that the thesis has allowed him to feel more secure regarding his future.

On the other hand, Isabel gives a personal view and sees her doctoral thesis as an opportunity to take an alternative career route. Natalie also views her doctoral thesis as a valuable contribution in developing her career prospects. She appears to be immersed in the process of undertaking a thesis. As we can deduce from above, all of the participants recognised the opportunities the thesis presented concerning their career prospects. In addition to this, participants appeared to feel more motivated and passionate about the thesis as it was seen...
as leading or guiding participants towards a prosperous future. This reflects how crucial a thesis is for many doctoral students, as it is seen as a way to determine their future career prospects. Wisker and Robinson (2013) suggested that undertaking a thesis provided participants with the emotional strength and skills for early development as researchers as well as the necessary tools to have successful careers. This clearly indicates that undertaking a doctoral thesis can be viewed as a positive experiences since it promotes career prospects and enhances research skills. King (2004) and Baruch and Hall (2004) support the view that the individual has the opportunities to manage their career and imaging this success can be a motivational factor. This study shows that the career prospects provide a sense of motivation and encouragement which are often needed for doctoral students to complete their thesis.

**Specialising in a field**

It was highlighted in the focus groups that several participants found the thesis an opportunity to become specialists in their respective research fields. The following quotes show the development of the participants in their research areas.

Chloe: *And having that specialist knowledge in some things it can lead to various things.*

James: *It can also create opportunities.*

Isabel: *So for me the idea of having some kind of overpaid teaching job which will not have a research component but would certainly involve me in engaging with research in a particular way is quite appealing. So I think that’s where I see my opportunity potentially.*

Gracie: *I think that the area of research I have focused on in my professional doctorate has wider application in psychological practice.*

Chloe recognises that having advanced knowledge and becoming a specialist in a certain field can lead to greater opportunities and lead on to different things. James appears to agree with Chloe and believes that having an advantage in the field can create new opportunities. Interestingly, Isabel is considering a career in education. She sees opportunity in that career as she can engage with research in a specialised way. Gracie can see that her research can be successfully applied in practice. The thesis can give her the specialised knowledge to enhance her own practice. All of the above participants express a positive attitude towards their thesis and recognise the knowledge that they can acquire and utilise from it.
What we can gather from Chloe and James’ words is the feeling that the thesis is valuable and can lead to advantages for their future in their chosen fields. Isabel gives a very personal view; she sees the thesis as an opportunity to get involved and engage with research. Gracie sees the thesis as applicable in the wider psychology field and, thus, she appears motivated as the course strongly supports her focus and personal goals. All of the above participants reported that a positive aspect of undertaking a thesis was the ability to specialise in their fields. Ali and Kohun (2007) noted that doctoral students are keen to express the advantages of undertaking the course and often showcase the opportunity to specialise in a field as a prominent example. It is clear that doctoral students may benefit in specialising in the area of interest. This can be rewarding, resulting in personal growth and increased career aspects. The idea of a new research culture is reflected by the participants who deemed this as an important element of the course.

**Publishing**

The opportunity to be published for many is a positive aspect of undertaking a thesis and the doctoral programme. Having publications under their name can enhance credentials and provide them with opportunities to follow specific research paths. Below are representative extracts from the focus groups.

Mark: *Opportunity to be published.*

Todd: *But also trying to publish the research undertaken and contributing to evidence informed practice.*

Gracie: *During the remaining time I intend to write for academic and professional journals to share my study findings; I feel this is a very important aspect of research for me that the findings are useful to others as well as my own practice and in some way the way I present findings may resonate and help readers those coming into contact with the research.*

Mark is specific about the opportunities completion of the thesis can bring. He identifies the opportunity to be published as a possibility and is excited about this. Todd appears to view publishing as a means to integrate both research and practice. Gracie is confident about her plans to progress after finishing the thesis. She specifically mentioned that publishing is important as she is able to apply her knowledge and research in order to produce something that is useful for others too. Mark, Todd and Gracie all identified the opportunity to be published as an advantage in undertaking the thesis. It can be suggested that Mark has an
interest in being published and therefore his writing skills must be advanced enough to do so. Todd not only sees completing a thesis as an opportunity to be published, but understands that it enables him to truly contribute to the field of counselling psychology. He appears to be very aware of the opportunity and is confident about his sense of identity about how he can integrate both research and practice components. Gracie appears passionate about presenting her research and its potential use in the field.

All of the previously mentioned participants appeared to show excitement when discussing the opportunities to publish and this appeared to give them motivation to pursue completion of the thesis. Cuthbert and Spark (2008) concur that publication opens up an opportunity for further research and academic advancement. It is something which is expected of a doctoral candidate. The participants from the focus groups clearly match Cuthbert and Spark’s expectations as they view publication as an achievement in their academic careers. Delamont et al. (2000) echo this by stating that dissertations often lead to publications and conference presentations, which indicate that they provide students with new opportunities.

**Subcategory 3: Sense of achievement**

The third subcategory that emerged from the focus groups was sense of achievement, which appeared to be a major positive aspect of the process of writing a thesis. The following concepts were identified under this subcategory and will be discussed: attaining a doctorate title, being inspired and motivated, and forming an identity.

**Attaining a doctorate title**

For many participants, the potential awarding of a doctoral title was a meaningful consequence of the thesis and the degree programme. Participants described this as being a significant and personal experience not only in their education, but in their lives in general. The following quotes show the participants’ feelings about being able to complete an extensive doctoral thesis.

Mark: *It gets me closer to achieving a doctorate.*

James: *So in a way I see research as something I have to do and need to get out of the way in order to get that title if that makes sense.*

Isabel: *That it’s just such a test of endurance as well. So to sort of be able to get through this is a major achievement and well worth celebrating.*
For Mark, an advantage of completing a doctoral thesis is that it brings him closer to his personal goal of being awarded a doctorate. For James, carrying out extensive research in a certain area is a necessity. He understands it as a compulsory component of the degree and knows that it is essential in order to gain the title. He outweighs the disadvantages of completing a thesis with the title it will bring him. Isabel recognises that completing a thesis is a major achievement in the doctoral programme. It is often viewed as a challenge and this means that completion is a sign that one has overcome that challenge. For several participants, the possibility of attaining a doctorate title was a positive result of undertaking the thesis. Mark, James and Isabel all discussed this aspect. Mark appears to have acquired motivation to complete the thesis as he sees it as a way to achieve a doctorate. The awarding of the title acts as a positive reinforcement and this is what inspires him to complete it. James shares a similar view with Mark in that he understands that undertaking the thesis is a compulsory element that will bring him closer to attaining the doctoral title. He also appears to be motivated by this and approaches it in a practical manner. Isabel looks on completing the thesis as a test of endurance and challenges herself to complete this so that she can celebrate her sense of achievement.

All of the participants appeared to show more motivation towards completing the doctoral thesis when presented with the opportunity to think about the title that would be awarded. Gardner (2007) suggested that when doctoral students complete their thesis in a timely manner, they experience a sense of achievement and this inspires them to become more immersed in the process. This is similar to the experiences in the focus groups, as those who reported this sense of pride and achievement appeared to be more inspired. Mowbray and Halse (2010) describe the positive emotions that doctoral candidates experience when nearing their goal and upon completion. Doctoral students that are near to the completion of their thesis can gain a sense of achievement. The imminent gaining of a doctoral title is a positive reinforcement of this.

**Being inspired and motivated**

Several participants reported that completing a doctoral thesis left them feeling inspired and motivated for future projects. The quotes below exemplify how the findings of the thesis have inspired the participants to be motivated.

Gracie: *I have two offers from two training companies who have asked me to write training programmes. I hope that these research will be published and this really inspires me to be motivated.*
Penny: Yes, why I’ve chosen to do what I do. Also, I suppose it does become part of your life and I think your thesis ... in my mind this is the early stages. It’s going to become part of my brain, literally there will be a part of my brain like my thesis. That bit of my brain is going to be my thesis for the rest of my life, and I want it to be service users’ voices or hearing the voices of the people I’m going to be working with. So that might be an idealistic thing but I suppose that’s what’s driving me to do it.

Gracie appears to have a positive outlook for the future as she has already received offers from companies to be published. She intended to publish her findings for this and this leads her to feel motivated and inspired about her future prospects. Penny prioritises her thesis above all aspects of the doctoral programme. After completing the doctoral thesis, she is eager to integrate it into her practice in order to help others. She feels motivated and inspired to help other people because of her findings. It is evident that both Gracie and Penny have a positive outlook and feel inspired by their work on the thesis. They see the thesis as an advantage that can help them progress in their careers.

Some participants reported feeling inspired and motivated about their research and their future prospects while undertaking a doctoral thesis. Gracie appears to be very confident, focused and optimistic. She does not report any unhelpful emotions and this appears to drive her forward to complete the thesis. Penny appears to be passionate and excited by the process. Her motivation keeps her on track and keeps her dedicated to her thesis. She demonstrates the ability to focus on integrating research and practice and therefore continuing her professional development. Developing a sense of motivation enabled the participants to show dedication to completing their thesis. This motivation appears to be a positive aspect of undertaking a thesis as they could apply it to other areas of their professional and personal life.

This is supported by the study of Stubb et al.(2010) which found that students experience bursts of enthusiasm to keep the momentum going throughout the process. Similarly, in the studies conducted by Gardner (2009) and Turner and McAlpine (2011), there is a sense of engagement from the researchers which leads to feelings of happiness, pleasure and creativity. Walker et al. (2008) argue that an essential key to completing a doctoral thesis is the candidates engaging and feeling passionate about their subject. This is consistent with the findings as those who exhibited these traits were deemed to be undertaking a more positive and rewarding journey. These studies are valuable because they break the stereotypical idea that undertaking a doctoral thesis mainly involves negative aspects.
Forming an identity

As opposed to the problems in forming an identity that were found above, there were a few participants who expressed the view that the process of writing a thesis was a positive aspect of their journey, which actually helped them form their identity as counselling psychologists.

Hala: *I found the process really useful for thinking about who I am and what my assumptions are and where I fit with the research method. And that’s something that makes our profession really distinct, isn’t it, that kind of capacity for self-reflection and bringing that into our work. I think that’s been really useful.*

Travis: *Personal development as a therapist and kind of going down deeper into myself. I think that’s one of the opportunities.*

For Hala, the process of the thesis is a reflective one. It allows her to reflect and identify who she is as a trainee counselling psychologist. It is a useful process which has increased her self-awareness with regards to her position in the profession and its methods. Travis believes that the process has allowed him to develop on both a professional and personal level. He can learn about himself as a trainee counselling psychologist, which he can apply to his work. Although many participants reported uncertainties and concerns about forming an identity in the field, some found that the thesis in fact helped them to form an identity as a counselling psychologist. Hala appears to find the thesis a valuable experience and shows insight into how this helps her form an identity. The process has been enriching for her and she appears to have used the process to self-reflect and factor this into her research. Travis, similarly, believes that the thesis has enabled personal growth, as well as professional development. As trainee counselling psychologists, it is essential that their identities become established within the field as this can allow them to feel more certain and comfortable within their work.

In this respect, undertaking a thesis is an advantage as it provides them with the opportunity to establish these identities. McAlpine et al. (2010) argue that past experiences, such as those in the doctoral journey, allow one to engage in the present and form goals and future expectations. Participants can build on their experiences in order to form an identity and determine who they wish to become as a counselling psychologist. Likewise, in the findings of Leonard et al. (2005), it was reported that doctoral students deemed shaping personal growth and advancement in training as important aspects that are developed throughout the process of writing a thesis. It is clear that undertaking a doctoral thesis does not only involve the excitement of gaining a title but also enables individuals to develop their personal and
professional growth which shows us the more positive aspects of undertaking a doctoral thesis.

**Subcategory 4: Creating a supportive network**

The final subcategory that was identified was creating a supportive network. Participants reported that having this network was essential for them in order to progress with their thesis and remain dedicated. The following concepts were identified under this subcategory from the focus groups: building a good relationship with supervisor and having supportive family and peers. These will be discussed below.

**Building a good relationship with supervisor**

Several participants felt that building a good relationship with the supervisor enabled them to effectively complete their thesis. The following quotes demonstrate how important it was for the participants to have this relationship:

Natalie: *I think a lot of the experience of refining it is, I felt, is influenced by my supervisor, so I felt that having a supervisor I really could trust was really important because there’s a lot about feeling safe in terms of finishing the project.*

Armand: *If you really wanted to do it you could, but there’s almost that thing of if you took something that was massive you might not complete the course. There’s that thing of where the tutors and supervisors are trying to be protective in that sense of you might not end up completing what you want to complete and you might not end up completing everything else as well. I suppose that’s one of the things they try and balance.*

Elaine: *So trusting your supervisor to guide you through the project.*

For Natalie, the role of the supervisor is vital in the process of the thesis. It is important for her that there is an element of trust between the two. She feels secure in the relationship and this has allowed the supervisor to play an important role in the completion of the thesis. Concordantly, Armand feels that supervisors and tutors can be trusted and protective even at times when the participant may feel unmotivated and negative about their project. Elaine supports these comments by also explaining that trust is essential in order for the relationship to work. She relies on instincts to build that trust and allows the supervisor to help and guide her. These three participants outspokenly expressed that the key to the success of a thesis
was to build a good working relationship with the supervisor. Natalie highlighted that it was important to feel secure in the relationship in order to trust the supervisor and their ideas. She strongly believes that the guidance from her supervisor is a major contribution to completing her doctoral thesis. Armand accepted the importance of the supervisor and recognises that his supervisor is nurturing and supportive throughout the ups and down of undertaking a thesis. It appears that he trusts his supervisor and values their guidance. Elaine supports this by maintaining that trust and a good relationship with the supervisor can determine the efficiency of completing the thesis.

In support of this, a study conducted in Australia by Ingleton and Cadman (2002) showed that, in order to build a successful supervisory relationship, acceptance, validation and support are all crucial aspects. The study pinpointed that confidence was important, something that was stressed by the participants; they felt that they needed confidence and trust in their supervisor in order to achieve a good working relationship. Wisker (2010) found that an effective supervisory relationship was essential for forming an identity as a researcher and the overall learning experience. This associates the supervisory relationship with the identity of the researcher and this identity is very significant. This similarly reflects and supports the feelings in the findings as participants felt that their journeys were more positive due to effective supervisory relationships. The effect of a positive relationship was also established by Ives and Rowley (2005), who determined that the relationship with the supervisor was paramount in setting the ground for a successful doctoral journey. This observation reinforces the importance of the relationships between supervisor and the doctoral student in order to successfully complete the thesis.

Supportive family and peers

It was found that participants felt that having support from family and peers was fundamental in trying to complete the doctoral thesis. The following quotes can be seen to reflect this concept.

Margie: *It was a difficult time. However I have a very supportive family helps to bring laughter, love and balance into my life which I believe to be necessary in research.*

Hala: *Yeah, there’s definitely something about just generally interacting with other people about the research even if it’s just, you know, a quick word over a coffee or we have… what do we have, four research seminars a year which we have to attend as a group, a whole group. As I say, how informal
the discussion is, it’s just a coffee and a chat or it’s a proper day of stuff. It helps just to talk about it.

Paulette: Yeah, and like having a bit of positive activity like something back from the university or good supervision. Or actually just being with our year group and just talking about it, you know, those things can be sort of positive boosters to the mood and to the attitude, I think.

Margie identifies that the process of writing the thesis was a difficult and challenging experience for her. However, the support network provided by her family facilitated this. Having her family who inspired her and encouraged her, allowed her to carry on and complete her thesis. Hala explains that having a support network in the form of her peers is important during the process of writing a thesis. Hala appears to feel a sense of relief when she is able to discuss the process with others who can also relate to it. Paulette also reports this need for an opportunity to engage with her peers and relieve any worries or stress she is experiencing regarding her thesis. She maintains that having supportive peers is a positive aspect of the thesis, one that allows her to feel comfortable and progress. It was established from the findings that Margie, Hala and Paulette considered having a supportive network of family and friends was essential in the endeavour to complete a thesis. Although Margie described the thesis as a difficult time, she acknowledges that the support of her family lessens the pressure. She appears to place importance on this and demonstrates that having this support whilst carrying out her thesis is essential. Hala reiterates the value of this support in the form of her peers and colleagues. She feels supported through attending seminars in the profession, which allows her to feel like she has empathy from others. She states that by simply having access to people who can relate to her, allows her to build connections and feel more supported.

Further, she believes that having someone to talk to about her thesis makes a big difference. Paulette also recognised that having someone to talk to was helpful because it gave her an opportunity to engage with her peers which boosted her mood and attitude. Boice (1993) and later Lonka (2003) determined that social support and feedback from peers were essential in progressing in academics. This is crucial for doctoral students to gain guidance, support and encouragement to complete the doctoral thesis and to reduce stress, uncertainty and lack of confidence.
As previously suggested, those who do not have this support can be in danger of becoming socially isolated. Although the focus was on having a supportive network of family and peers, the participants demonstrated a simple need to voice their ideas and concerns just by talking to others. Beauchamp et al. (2009) and Jazvac-Martek (2009) echoed this by stating that postgraduates must seek social support to develop success. Wisker (2003) argues that this social support is essential to build emotional intelligence, which then aids the successful completion of the thesis. Social support is valuable to help doctoral students to progress in completing their thesis and to reduce the challenges as well as to gain encouragement.

4.4 Conclusion: Findings & Discussion

No further data analysis was carried out once the theory had been generated. The reason for this was that no new or relevant insights were emerging (Bryman, 2001), however this study does not claim that it has achieved saturation. I was cautious of claiming to have achieved full data saturation as I was in accordance with Glaser and Strauss (1967), who suggested that it is not possible for researchers to achieve complete saturation, as it is also possible that more data may emerge. It would not be true to state that this study represents a qualitative exploration of the overall experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis rather it represents an emergent theory since two core categories emerged from the data; (1) Obstacles in completing a thesis and (2) Positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis. The theory that emerged from this study shows that trainee counselling psychologists have both positive and negative experiences which appear to fluctuate during the process of undertaking a thesis and vary from person to person due to individual circumstances. It is vital not to envisage a dichotomy between the positive and negative experiences, which form a natural and necessary journey for all doctoral students. The trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a thesis can be viewed as an emotional and multifaceted journey. Overall, the shared experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis was a valuable contribution to this study.

There are several possible explanations for these findings. Firstly, the positive and negative experiences are caused by the rewarding and demanding nature of undertaking a doctoral thesis. These experiences fluctuate naturally over time. Overcoming a difficult stage of the thesis often transforms a negative experiences into a positive one. Secondly, the perception and the individual circumstance of trainees determine their interpretation of positive and negative experiences and will vary from person to person. It is evident that the theory can be further explored as more questions are raised on the experiences of trainee counselling
psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. Although I had expected a different result and had preconceived ideas, due to my own personal struggle, I tried to prevent them from affecting the result of the study. Furthermore, as a number of researchers pointed out (Smaling, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005), a researcher can’t be absolutely free of preconceptions and the aim of grounded theory is not to dismiss the subjectivity of the researcher but understand it in order to become aware of bias.
4.5 Methodological Discussion

In this section I will be outlining the methodological limitations and how these problems will be addressed. This section will examine a crucial part of this study which is the methodological considerations and decisions that were made during the course of the study. In particular, this section will explore the aspects of the study that went well and any improvements that could be suggested for future research. Within these sections, I will be covering the qualitative nature of the study and the limitations of this design. Next, I will explore the grounded theory method and consider the implications faced throughout its development. Alongside this, I will discuss the procedure of data collection and its significance. In the final section, I will summarise the ideas and provide a personal reflection on adopting a grounded theory for my study.

The qualitative design of the study

This study adopted a qualitative design which uses a naturalistic approach (Patton, 2001), as the aim was to find out the personal experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. Thus, the goals of this study were best accomplished by use of a qualitative research design approach. The major strength in working directly with trainee counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom was that they are closely related to the counselling psychology profession. It served my purpose to capture the unique experiences of trainees writing their thesis. As a trainee counselling psychologist myself, and a strong believer in our counselling psychology profession, I considered a qualitative design to be the most suitable choice.

This has further enabled me to interpret and better understand the complex reality of the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. Furthermore, I believe this approach shed more light and added richness to my study (Morrow, 2007). In contrast, the process of analysing the data for a qualitative design can be difficult (Lawrence & Tar, 2013). Below I briefly outline and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this study and evaluate the positive outcomes it produced.
The procedures of qualitative data analysis: a grounded theory framework

A grounded theory study was used as an emergent design for this study. Furthermore, the study adopts a constructivist stance and grounded theory fits well, as opposed to the positivist paradigm (Hurd, 2008). Therefore, it can be stated that the study incorporates multiple voices, views and visions from the trainee counselling psychologists (Charmaz, 2006). According to Gibbs (2010), using grounded theory to do so is a rigorous and time-consuming process and this can lead to being overwhelmed by the data. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data for this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To ensure that the study went through a rigorous process some stages of the grounded approach of Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) were employed as guidelines in the data analysis. The analysis for this study was time-consuming due to the overwhelming number of participants in the focus groups. However, having such a large sample provided me with a broader amount of data and, therefore, a diverse range of experiences. It enabled me to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists. On the other hand, McMurray, et al. (2004) posit that using such a large amount of data can provide several challenges. This obstacle was evident in this study as it was challenging to analyse a large amount of data, which had the potential to cause problems such as a risk of the data becoming disordered. I addressed this problem by being organised and rigorous in my audit trail. For example, I used a creative process by having different colours to represent my coding and used posters to analyse my data. This was guided by my supervisor. In addition, there was a risk of the omission of certain data as I had to be selective about what to present in my findings. Being aware of this situation meant that I took precautions to avoid it as I analysed the data. This reflected my integrity as a researcher. This risk has been acknowledged by several researchers (e.g. Cronholm, 2002).

Despite facing these challenges, one of the strengths of this study was that I adopted strategies to ensure quality throughout the analysis. Several strategies were employed to demonstrate the rigour and trustworthiness in a qualitative design (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These were member checking, peer validation, frequent debriefing sessions with my supervisor, an audit trail and finally a personal journal for the purpose of reflexivity. This study successfully adopts a purposive sampling consisting of trainee counselling psychologists. The reasons behind choosing this sampling method was due to knowledge or experience in the area of interest that the selected individuals had acquired (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). In this case, the study selected trainee counselling psychologists, with the intention of considering the
research question that examines the experiences of the participants undertaking a doctoral thesis. Hence, the selected participants met the desired characteristics for my study.

Secondly, this method is useful to gain the opinion of the target population which was more readily accessible for my study (Bernand, 2002). Despite the obvious bias of purposive sampling, the method can be applied to a larger or different population group and therefore has some applicability on a broader scope (Gledhill et al., 2008). This brings us to the next limitation that was found for this study which was the lack of theoretical sampling that restricted the aims of the study with regard to theory generation (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Thus, a theoretical sampling method could have been used in this study in order to examine existing theoretical insights or to develop new ones (Higginbottom, 2004).

This strategy could have reinforced the theory developed from the data collection and analysis (Devers & Frankel, 2000). For example, I could have taken another group of trainee counselling psychologists and seen if their responses differed from my theory (Devers & Frankel, 2000). This indicates a clear limitation and, if applied, could have further strengthened the quality of the study (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009). However, I had to consider time constraints and whether using a theoretical sampling method would be feasible. Therefore it is difficult to assert this study fully represents a qualitative exploration for trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. A crucial decision that I made for this study was to decide when to stop sampling. Many authors suggest that researchers should stop sampling when theoretical saturation is reached (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser, 1992; Bowen, 2008; O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). In analysing the results of the study, a level of “theoretical saturation” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 102) may have been achieved in this study.

During the analysis phase, I observed repeated concepts and categories in the data. This was also achieved by the constant comparison method in the data until each category was saturated. Saturation means that no new data emerges or the relationships among categories are well validated (Schreiber, 2011). The saturation levels of this study add to its reliability (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009). However, I am not claiming to have completely achieved saturation and I have to acknowledge the limitations and shortcomings of data saturation in the data collection, and the analysis due to time and data exhaustion (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). This was resolved by peer debriefing and validation of the results of my analysis together with the continuous guidance from my supervisor. This led to a decision that some form of theoretical saturation had been attained.
The procedures of data collection: focus groups

Focus groups were considered suitable for the aim of this study because they generated a “therapeutic effect or group effect” (Lederman, 2004) that results in support and synergy among those sharing their experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Tracy (2013) highlights that focus groups are useful to gain a wide range of data. Therefore, this study benefited from having three focus groups as they provided flexibility and, hence, resulted in a wide range of data.

Participants in the focus groups

Although focus groups were useful for this study, I still encountered some challenges in the process of collecting my data. As a moderator, I tried to ensure all participants spoke equally and I tried to maintain a balance in the groups; despite all effort, this was still a challenge for me. For example, having a very dominant participant, Travis, in one of the focus groups may have resulted in the study not having the opportunity to incorporate the opinions of others. It also might have discouraged others from sharing, due to having a lack of confidence to express their views over the views of others. I took measures in the focus group by trying to acknowledge how Travis was feeling and, as a moderator, I tried to give equal opportunity to all participants. This involved giving extra time for participants who felt that could not express themselves and I invited participants to email me later if they wished. Further research suggests that due to one person dominating the attention of the group, the overall engaging dynamic of the focus group may have been lost (Hopkins, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2009).

In spite of this, my selected participants stimulated greater discussion and shared ideas. It encouraged a wider range of interaction in the experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis for this study. Since the study utilised a semi-structured interview, it provided rich data that was used to analyse and identify the experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. This was considered valuable to the study as it contributed richness to the data (Gill et al, 2008). Another potential limitation of using focus groups for my study was that I was unable to capture the subjectivity of each individual (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014) and only captured the thoughts of a group as a whole. As a result, the focus groups for this study cannot provide valid information at the individual level and the data is not representative of other groups (Stewart et al., 2014). I knew that this would be a limitation but I focused on...
the main concerns of the participants, trying to pay attention to individuals and how their body language implied how they felt about points in the discussion.

The next implication that arose was the issue of bias; using focus groups that are especially prone to bias (Mansell et al., 2004). I was cautious of this issue in my study, as my participants were trainee counselling psychologists like me. I was aware of my own position as a trainee counselling psychologist, which could have meant that participants were wary of being analysed and thus they might have responded in a more psychologically fitting way (Marshall et al., 2013). This could have influenced the results of the study. For instance, I noticed that Travis felt very strongly about the profession and often stressed the importance of undertaking a doctoral thesis. He often challenged others who did not feel as passionate about the thesis. This may have been a reason that other participants might have felt threatened or less confident to express their true views and may have tried to avoid approaching the topic. In addressing this issue, I reminded the participants in the focus groups that I valued each of their opinions and appreciated their feelings.

This study was potentially influenced by the Hawthorne effect whereby participants alter their thoughts and behaviour as they know they are being studied, which can potentially lead to inaccurate data recordings (Payne & Payne, 2004). As a result, the participants might have responded in a polite and diplomatic way as they may have wished to aid my research. Additionally, participants may have disguised their feelings because they were conscious of others in the group. Margie, for example, openly admitted she was feeling guilty but did not want to talk further about this guilt. There may be several reasons behind this. Firstly, she may have felt nervous talking in front of a large group. Secondly, it is possible to speculate that she knew some of the other participants in the group. This could have affected the richness of the data as some information from Margie may have been valuable, but I may have missed the opportunity to hear and add it to the study’s data.

On the other hand, it can be argued that this sense of awareness may have strengthened the confidence of the participants and my findings. As both a researcher and a trainee counselling psychologist, it was challenging for me to separate the dual role and not become too involved in the process. I empathised with the participants who were trying to complete the thesis as I am going through the same process. I could relate to some of the participants’ experiences but I was aware of my role as a researcher and ensured my thoughts were separated from those of the participants. I recognised this limitation and I tried to reduce bias
in the study by using a personal journal for separating my thoughts and reflections. Russell and Kelly (2002) strongly advise the use of personal journals as a strategy that can facilitate the researcher to record their own thoughts and, therefore, limit the influence of their analysis of the findings.

Coming from a constructivist perspective, I recognise the importance of the interactive relationship between myself and the participants in the research process (Mill et al., 2006). In order to ensure that all the participants had an equal opportunity and also to address some of the limitations, I adopted some strategies. One of the strategies was providing extra time to give the participants an opportunity to voice any additional opinions or feelings that they were not able to express in the group. I also encouraged them to email me any points that they felt were particularly important, but were not expressed in the focus groups. As a researcher, I tried to be open and to recognise the value of each participant’s contribution to the study. Since this study adopts a constructive stance, it captures a variety of truths and realities of subjectivism, which can be seen as one of its strengths (Mills et al., 2006). Despite the diversity of the experiences of the participants, it should be noted that this may not represent the general views of the population of the doctoral students in the counselling psychology profession.

Considering the sample collected for this qualitative study, there is a risk that, with a larger sample of participants, different outcomes might have been produced. For example, the results of this should not be generalised, as any given results may have been different depending on the moderator, respondent or settings (Hannes, 2011). This study can be compared to a previous one done by Leonard et al. (2005) and Gill and Hoppee (2009) who found that the motivations for completing a doctorate are complex and can vary. My results were similar to this, uncovering a wide range of experiences of findings that were complex, multiple and thus providing leads for future studies. The results of my study show that trainee counselling psychologists have both positive and negative experiences which appear to fluctuate during the process of undertaking a thesis and vary from person to person due to individual circumstances, leaving the area to be further explored. To conclude, due to the unique features of the counselling psychology profession, the results cannot necessarily be applied to other professions and researchers must also be cautious when applying the findings to other countries (Lind-blom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, & Ashwin, 2006; McCune & Hounsell, 2005).
Personal Reflection

A qualitative approach, using a grounded theory research design, was used to explore the research question of the study. In exploring the trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis, three focus groups were utilised, which enabled me to have access to a variety of experiences and voices rather than using one-to-one interviews (Akerlind, 2005). As a novice researcher, I felt anxious and uncertain about which approach was considered suitable to answer my research question. However, I experienced a sense of relief when I found that grounded theory is very suitable for a novice researcher as it is open to new ideas and has a higher tolerance for ambiguity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Personally, I felt that this study shows the potential value of what grounded theory can offer and acknowledges some of the criticisms. I found that working with grounded theory involves an intellectual journey (Charmaz, 2014) as I have gained more insight into the implications and theoretical positions for my study. I have especially enjoyed this creative journey as it enabled me to explore my professional and personal areas that took place in the study and deepen the research process. Hence, these findings have theoretical transferability (Merritt- Gray & Varcoe, 2013) in terms of further studies in the field of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. Although more studies on this area are needed, the present findings regarding counselling psychology can be considered valuable to current findings in the applied psychology profession and, in a broader sense, for higher education concerning doctoral and PhD students.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of the current study. The findings were demonstrated from a qualitative perspective. This chapter synthesised and discussed the results in light of the study’s research question, literature review and the methodological implications for the study. Overall, in this chapter I reflected thoroughly on the study’s findings and the practical and theoretical implications. From the findings, two core categories were identified. All of the eight subcategories were illustrated using quotes extracted from the focus groups, which were used to provide evidence to support the data. In addition to this, in the subsequent section I reflect upon all the findings and discuss the relevance of these in order to further identify the issues raised by the focus groups. Furthermore, they were analysed alongside the existing literature, in order to determine whether the results are supported or contradicted by it. However, the study has limitations that should be noted for future research. The
findings are consistent with theoretical and research literature, which consists of PhD and doctoral students in general. However, it is important to note that there is very little known about the trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Following this discussion of the findings, I discussed implications of the methodology for this study and explored the strengths and weaknesses which I then used to consider whether the study had answered the research question.
*Chapter 5: Conclusion*

This thesis set out to explore the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom. The focus was to discover how the trainees perceive and make meaning of their experiences and how they go about writing their doctoral thesis. In this chapter, I will be providing a brief overview of the study followed by suggested routes into possible future research areas. Finally, I will be concluding this study with a personal reflection.

5.1 An Overview of the Study

Undertaking a doctoral thesis is a demanding yet rewarding process that involves numerous experiences ranging from positive experiences to negative aspects that are seen as obstacles. The experience has been appropriately described as a ‘rollercoaster of confidence and emotions’ (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune 2008, p.225). A thesis is a requirement of the doctoral counselling psychology programme and plays an important role in forming an identity as a trainee counselling psychologist. While extensive research exists for doctorate experiences in general, less is known about the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a thesis. Therefore this study deals with the less understood aspects of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis.

The rationale behind this study is to explore how trainee counselling psychologists perceive and make meaning of their experiences and how they go about writing a doctoral thesis. McLeod (2003) points out that, while research is essential, speaking out about the experiences involved in the research process is also pivotal. In accordance with McLeod, I wanted to provide an opportunity for these experiences to be heard. Further, my motivation for this particular study developed from my own personal struggle of undertaking a doctoral thesis and, therefore, I was curious to find out how other trainees felt and whether their experiences differed from mine. Furthermore, this study aims to understand the variety of experiences of trainee counselling psychologists and I wanted to have a better understanding of the variety of the trainees’ experiences as each individual’s view is unique and enriching. I also hope that this study will be able to provide strategies and resources that enable trainee counselling psychologists to relate their experiences to those of others. With this in mind, I also wanted to see how this affects trainees psychologically. On a personal level it gave me
confidence and it improved my clinical practice. This will enable me, in the future, to use my counselling skills to help trainees undertaking a doctoral thesis. I also hope that the potential of this research topic will be further explored in future years and that this study begins to provide an insight into the counselling psychology profession.

A qualitative method design was used to answer the research question and was considered best suited as it helped me to gain a richer detailed picture of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis (Creswell, 2007). This proved to be the case because this study successfully captured the way trainee counselling psychologists construct meaning in terms of perceptions, thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Merriam, 2009). As a result, these experiences narrated by trainee counselling psychologists were diverse and valuable to this study. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data because it differs from all other methods in that its main aim is to generate a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This study achieved a positive outcome by generating a theory and offering an insightful explanation of how trainees make meaning or interpret their experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. This data was collected by adopting a purposive sampling of trainee counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom. These trainees were at different stages of writing a doctoral thesis which provided a diverse range of experiences that was invaluable to the study. In order to further explore the issue, the participants were asked the research question: What are the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists when undertaking a doctoral thesis? The discussion of the research question was guided by three sub-questions: (1) What challenges do trainee counselling psychologists encounter when undertaking a doctoral thesis? (2) What opportunities do trainee counselling psychologists see in undertaking a doctoral thesis? (3) How do trainee counselling psychologists view their research or doctoral thesis impacting their practice?

This study yields results supported by literature relevant to the question of exploring the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a thesis. The results of this study show that two categories emerged from the data: (1) Obstacles in completing a thesis and (2) Positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis. Subsequently, four subcategories were identified in the first core category, which were (1) unhelpful emotions, (2) demanding nature of a thesis, (3) personal difficulties, and (4) lack of communication. For the second core category, four subcategories were discovered. These were (1) acquiring new experiences, (2) new opportunities, (3) sense of achievement and (4) creating a supportive network. The theory that emerged from this study shows that
trainee counselling psychologists have both positive and negative experiences while undertaking a doctoral thesis.

These experiences appear to fluctuate during the life span of the studies and vary from person to person due to individual circumstances. It was found the success in overcoming a difficult stage of the thesis often transforms a negative experience into a positive one. Negative experiences can be alleviated by having a good relationship with the supervisors and other trainee counselling psychologists, and by keeping in touch with family and friends. Clearly, the level of confidence and determination of the individual is paramount in providing a more positive focus for the completion of the thesis. However, if the negative experiences worsen they may also increase and become detrimental to the production of the thesis. It is vital not to envisage a dichotomy between the positive and negative experiences, which form a natural and necessary journey for all doctoral students. The trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a thesis can be viewed as an emotional and multifaceted journey towards becoming a scholar and acquiring a broad range of skills in order to carry out their thesis effectively and to be successful academics. Overall, the shared experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis was a valuable contribution to this study. It was important to be wary of the limitations in this study. For instance, one limitation was the small number of participants in the focus groups and their diverse linguistic, cultural and psychological backgrounds. However, the aim of the study was not to identify universal truths about the trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences but rather to gain an in-depth look at the perspectives of the participants in the focus groups (Cotterall, 2013). Furthermore, it would be thought-provoking to compare and contrast the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis in other countries.

The analysis of this study points to a need for more research, in particular research that examines in more detail the trainee counselling psychologists’ aspects of completing a thesis. The reason for this is when a diverse range of experiences is shared among trainee counselling psychologists it creates a forum for acquiring new knowledge and learning from others, this can be an empowering process. These experiences are conducive to forming a better idea of completing a thesis, but also point out the need for a more focused inquiry so that it gains a fuller understanding of these formative experiences. However, a refined analysis of the experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis by trainee counselling psychologists would be a valuable focus for future works, and an additional extension in the
area concerning writing and publication practices. This may provide an opportunity for trainees to be active in research.

Although more studies in this area are needed, the present findings, regarding counselling psychology, can be extended to the applied psychology profession and, in a broader sense, are applicable to all doctorate students.

5.2 Future Recommendation

Three recommendations have been made based upon the findings of this study. These are briefly explained below:

(1) **Current and future trainee counselling psychologists**

Current and future trainee counselling psychologists who consider undertaking a doctorate in counselling psychology may find this study to be a useful resource. It offers a unique spectrum of the variety of experiences of trainees undertaking a doctoral thesis. This could be useful because it provides a different perception of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Further, this affords an opportunity to share and learn from others and provides hope for the future of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis. It also encourages new trainee counselling psychologists to consider the doctorate counselling psychology programme with a view to joining it. It also provides a reality of the positive and negative experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis and how they fluctuate during the life-span of the studies, and vary from person to person. It will also prepare current and future trainees and give them a form of guidance and motivation to embark on the journey of undertaking a doctoral thesis. This is particularly useful for novice researchers who intend to get a picture of what lies ahead. Current and future trainee counselling psychologists will be informed of the experiences and can take a productive approach in managing doctoral endeavours.

Two examples are shown below as how this study could be utilised further:

Example 1: A future trainee counselling psychologist who would like to consider the counselling psychology programme but was worried about the research component may find this study useful as it gives an overview of what research consists, and the experiences narrated by other trainee counselling psychologists may alleviate some of the concerns. Therefore, this could change the perception or attitude toward research in a positive way.
Example 2: A highly motivated trainee counselling psychologist who is passionate about research may find this study to be valuable as it talks about the positive aspects such as motivation, acquiring new skills and a sense of achievement. Reading these positive experiences can further motivate trainee counselling psychologists to consider publishing. In addition, this may also encourage a forum for peers to discuss conceptual research framework ideas.

(2) Supervisor and lecturer
Supervisors and lecturers play a vital role in the completion of a doctoral thesis and their importance cannot be over emphasised. The supervisor is responsible for the guidance and evaluation of the trainees’ progress in undertaking a thesis. The success of an effective supervisory relationship relies heavily on both the supervisor and the trainees, without it there may be delay, confusion and a failure to complete the thesis. An effective supervisor would monitor the progress of the trainees at each stage of the process. The supervisor gets an opportunity to hear a version of the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis and can have a closer look at the diversity of these experiences. These diverse experiences provide a lens for examining the thoughts, emotions and behaviours of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a thesis. These thoughts, emotions and behaviours are interrelated and may form patterns, either positive or negative. For example, a trainee counselling psychologist presents a problem of having a lack of confidence in writing. This problem may increase with negative thoughts that might lead to unhelpful emotions such as anxiety, stress and fear leading to unhelpful behaviour such as avoidance, procrastination and isolation. The supervisor can recognise and take steps to prevent this negative pattern from continuing or getting worse. Additionally, supervisors may consider encouraging trainees to talk about challenges that do not directly pertain to the thesis but that may impede its progress. This recommendation strongly depends on both the trainee and the supervisor working together towards completing the doctoral thesis. Below I illustrate two examples when this study can be useful for a supervisor or a lecturer.

Example 1: A supervisor could use this study by selecting several experiences as examples to use in research group discussions. For instance, trainees can exchange their views about their thoughts and feelings about writing the thesis. This will enable the trainee counselling
psychologists and the supervisors to create a forum for sharing these experiences, which can help supervisors and trainees to establish a more effective relationship.

Example 2: A supervisor could help a trainee counselling psychologists to identify other issues that may hinder the completion of a thesis. For instance, a foreign student is feeling homesick and is struggling to complete her thesis. The supervisor could use this study to talk about isolation and explore ways to help the student to progress and successful complete her thesis.

(3) Future currency for the applied psychology and doctorate programmes
This study may contribute to a future currency for applied psychology and doctorate programmes. In the case of applied psychology, the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis may be helpful and can be used as a learning tool or guidance depending on the nature and the subject of the course. This further can encourage a common discussion or a forum to exchange ideas among other psychologists. Future research may be more applicable in the field of applied psychology because the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a thesis is a worthwhile area to explore as counselling psychology is considered to be a new profession in applied psychology. This study could extend or reach out to the doctorate programmes which may find the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists undertaking a doctoral thesis to be of interest. The diverse experiences of undertaking a doctorate or a PhD thesis differ as each individual has unique experiences or has a different outlook. However, there are some experiences that PhD students share with trainee counselling psychologists, both positive and negative. Today there are a lot of helpful good books, articles and research papers that have been published on how to complete a thesis. However, this study offers a unique insight into the trainees’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. I would posit that listening to people’s experiences is more subjective and has a personal touch. This provides an opportunity to acquire knowledge and to appreciate the diverse experiences, it also enables one to be cautious and provides the confidence to start the journey of undertaking a doctoral thesis. Below are I demonstrate how this study may be valuable.

Example 1: A PhD student may find it useful and worthwhile to read this study as it looks at both positive and negative experiences and how they may fluctuate. Some of these
experiences involve emotional aspects that are universal, for instance, fear, anxiety, stress, joy, passion and satisfaction.

Example 2: Students from applied psychology can benefit from this study by being aware of some of the experiences that lie ahead in conducting and writing research. This will enable them to take precautions and to set clear goals for their research.

5.3 Reflection on Completing this Study
I had several reflections in my mind as this doctoral thesis was approaching completion. My experiences on the journey were exciting and yet at times it appeared to be never ending. For example, at times I felt excited when writing each chapter and satisfied in completing the chapter, however I was faced with the anguish of starting the next chapter. I felt many positive and negative experiences which fluctuated as I went through the process of revising each chapter time and time again under the guidance of my supervisor. I identify with the theory that emerged from this study. It was a great opportunity to carry out this doctoral thesis and the most rewarding experience was the privilege of listening to the participants in the focus groups as I felt alive during their interaction. The most rewarding part of conducting the study was analysing the data. I got really fascinated with grounded theory and enjoyed every stage of the method. The engagement of data collection and its analysis has been my strongest learning point in completing my doctoral study. The most challenging part for me in completing this study was the writing element. I felt that it was a long and difficult process. At times I felt frustrated and disappointed with my lack of writing skills, which led me to unhelpful behaviour, such as procrastination. As I near the conclusion of this study, I wish to reflect upon my experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis and how it has affected my professional and personal life. I have now experienced the doctoral counselling psychology programme from two perspectives; as a researcher and as a counselling psychologist practitioner in clinical settings. I firmly believe that studying for, and gaining, a doctorate is truly a life-changing experience.

Reflection as a trainee counselling psychologist and as a researcher
My journey towards becoming a counselling psychologist has transformed me from a trainee to a competent, independent and responsible individual. Overall, this was a humbling experience. I felt that it has given me a great opportunity to improve my skills in two essential
areas; research and practice. In terms of practice I strongly believe that it has given me a sense of awareness and recognition of the importance of the practice component. In completing my study I realised that my skills in clinical practice may be transferable to aiding current and future trainee counselling psychologists to complete their doctoral thesis.

Based on the results of the study it was found that trainees have both positive and negative experiences while undertaking a thesis and these experiences may fluctuate depending on the circumstances of the individual. I strongly feel that I am well-equipped to provide therapeutic help in enabling a trainee to progress in their journey of completing a doctoral thesis. Therefore, this will enhance my practice component, allow me to explore different areas and may begin to open new prospects. As regards research, I would like to reflect on some of the areas that impacted on me as a researcher. The opportunity of undertaking this study has led to my having a greater appreciation of the value of research. It has certainly given me a fresh perspective on my views towards research. In reflecting on my experiences of undertaking the study I found that it has improved my personal and professional aspects. On a personal level, I have greatly benefited from the research experience through improving my writing skills and having better time-management skills which I initially found challenging.

On a professional level, it has given me a different outlook, as I now view research in a rigorous manner. This further has given me the opportunity to engage actively in research. I also have a better understanding of philosophical stance, which involves a view about reality that is a guide to the nature of change and human behaviour. I further recognise the various paradigms that incorporate ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspectives. I believe this has given me a strong foundation for research. With this in mind I hope in the future this gives me an opportunity to publish something valuable in the area of interest. Overall, I feel that I have grown and I have managed to integrate research and practice on my way to becoming a counselling psychologist.

Personal reflection
As someone who was shy and often labelled as a failure, I struggled with my sense of confidence and had no self-belief. Throughout my early academic life I had no success and I am struck with the idea of studying for a doctoral level at this phase of my life. Despite the ups and downs of my academic journey I came across people who believed in me and some who did not. I am thankful for having all these experiences and having supportive people
along my journey. I would not categorise or remove any one of these experiences because I believe that they combined to play a necessary role in shaping me into a stronger individual. I am now able to have confidence in my own views and in my independent opinions. Initially, I was reluctant to speak in group discussions as I felt inadequate and did not want to be embarrassed. Gradually, I found the courage to share my views and thoughts because I realised that sharing and exchanging thoughts with others was a very enriching process. This enabled me to believe in myself and I became aware that my opinions were valued. This challenging time was supported by my tutor, supervisor and colleagues whose constructive feedback gave me the opportunity to improve and to learn. It has been a great pleasure to complete this thesis and I feel optimistic about this study and how it can be valuable in the future. Further, I would like to help others to be confident and enable them to be successful in completing their thesis because I once struggled academically and I am happy to share my journey with others. I personally feel this would be the most rewarding thing I have to offer. However, I am aware of the limitation of this study and I am cautious of what it can offer. I recognise the challenges it might face. I feel my journey does not end here but that it is a continuous learning curve as I could explore the theory that emerged as it relates to my own experiences and other trainee counselling psychologists. Overall, the experience of undertaking a doctoral thesis has transformed me and enriched my journey.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter gives a brief overview of the doctoral study as a whole. This overview emphasises key points and discusses the impact of this study on the author at a professional and personal level and looks at the integration of research and practice. This study captured the reality of the trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis and significantly contributed to the body of knowledge in the area of interest. It further included recommendations for future research areas. In particular, it was noted that the research informed the practice and vice versa. In the conclusion of the thesis, I explore the optimistic future for this study and also its limitations and I am cautious of what it can offer in a broader sense.
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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Opening Statement

The aim of the focus group interview is to explore the trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom. I am also interested in looking at the individual experiences, attitudes, challenges and opportunities that trainees might encounter whilst undertaking a doctoral thesis, as each trainee will have a unique understanding towards research.

By having a focus group I intend to engage a group of participants in an interactive dialogue, which will be spontaneous and creative. I would like to understand how trainee counselling psychologists perceive and make meaning of their experiences and how they go about completing their doctoral thesis.

I have a few specific areas I am interested in looking at and at the same time I am eager to listen to what you have to say. My role will be similar to a moderator, but mostly I will be listening, reflecting, asking questions to clarify any unclear points, and checking that I understand you. The focus group will last for at least two hours. The areas I wish to cover are as follows:

- What are the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists when undertaking a doctoral thesis?
- What challenges do trainee counselling psychologists encounter when undertaking a doctoral thesis?
- What opportunities do trainee counseling psychologists see in undertaking a doctoral thesis?
- How do trainee counseling psychologist view their research or doctoral thesis impacting their practice?

Potential probes:

Could you say a bit more about that?

Do you have any more examples of that?
Appendix B

Invitation Letter

Invitation Letter

Dear Sir/ Madam,

My name is Sabita Santira Kesu and I am doing my second year of my Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of Manchester. I am writing to you to seek permission to conduct a focus group in your institution. My current research is under the supervision of Dr Terry Hanley (Programme Director). The title of this research is “An exploration of trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom”. The main purpose of carrying out this research is to give an insight into the overall attitudes, experiences and perspectives of trainee counselling psychologists carrying out the doctoral thesis.

To facilitate this study I intend to conduct a focus group in a variety of institutions in order to capture a range of different views. Therefore I would really appreciate it if you could circulate information sheets to trainee counselling psychologists doing a Doctorate in your department. Potential participants can be from any year of the course.

Thank you in advance for your assistance,

Yours sincerely,

Sabita Santira kesu

Contact for further information

Researcher: Sabita Santira kesu, counselling psychologist trainee at the University of Manchester
Email: sabita.santirakesu@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Supervisor: Terry Hanley, Lecturer in Counselling Psychology, at the University of Manchester
Email: terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk   Phone: 01612758627
Appendix C

Information Sheet

An exploration of trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom

My name is Sabita Santira Kesu and I am currently pursuing my Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of Manchester. I am writing to invite you to be a part of my study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. There will be an opportunity for me to go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have, contact details are provided at the end of the information sheet. Thank you.

What is the aim of the research?

The main purpose of carrying out this research is to explore trainee counselling psychologists’ experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis. I am also interested in looking at the individual experiences, attitudes, challenges and opportunities that trainees might encounter whilst undertaking a doctoral thesis, as each trainee will have a unique understanding towards research.

Why have I been chosen?

I am inviting you to be in this study because you are a trainee counselling psychologist and therefore can offer insight into the experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis, and because you have indicated that you have an interest in this research. It is important to remember that this is not compulsory.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

If you agree to take part you will be asked to participate in a focus group which will last for at least two hours. This can be conducted at a time and location convenient to you. Within this focus group interview you will be asked about your individual experiences, challenges and opportunities in undertaking a doctoral thesis. All interviews will be recorded.

What happens to the data collected?

The audio recording of the focus group interview will be deleted after transcription and the electronic document containing the transcription will be kept in password-protected files. Any paper copies will be kept in locked storage. Only the researcher and research supervisor will have access to the transcribed interview. Some quotes may be used in the write-up of the research, but these will be in no way identifiable; where there is uncertainty, the researcher will check this with you. After transcription, you will be sent a copy of the document for you to check over, and after the data analysis has been conducted and the themes generated, you will be given another opportunity to see them.
How is confidentiality maintained?

All efforts will be made to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. As mentioned above, the electronic data will be kept in password-protected files and there will be no identifiable information contained within the write-up of the report. Any hard copies of the transcript will be kept in locked storage. These safeguards are in compliance with the University of Manchester regulation on data protection.

What happens if I do not want to take part or change my mind?

Participation in this research is voluntary. You will have two weeks with this information sheet before you will be asked if you would like to consent to take part in the study. If you have any questions during this time, do not hesitate to contact the researcher. If you do agree to take part, there will be a number of points where you will have the opportunity to change your mind if you wish. If you sign the consent form but then change your mind at any point while the interview is being recorded, you can withdraw from the research. Finally, you can change your mind and withdraw from the research after reading both the transcript and a cursory analysis of the data, if you choose to see this.

What is the duration of the research?

The focus group interview will last between one to two hours in length.

Will the outcomes of the study be published?

The outcomes of the study will form part of a University thesis, and there may be further publications in academic journals. As detailed above, there will be no identifiable information written about you in these publications.

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information, please refer below.

Contact for further information

Researcher: Sabita Santira kesu, counselling psychologist trainee at the University of Manchester
Email: sabita.santirakesu@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Supervisor: Terry Hanley, Lecturer in Counselling Psychology, at the University of Manchester
Email: terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk Phone: 01612758627
Appendix D

Consent Form

Title of the research: An exploration of trainee counselling psychologist’s experiences of undertaking a doctoral thesis in the United Kingdom.

Aim of the research: This proposed study aims to explore the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists’ in undertaking a doctoral thesis.

Aim of focus group: To engage a group of participants in an interactive dialogue, this will be as spontaneous and creative as possible.

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below:

Please Initial Box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

3. I agree to take part in the above study.

4. I agree to the focus group being audio recorded.

5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.

I agree to take part in the above project:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Audit Trail (stages of analysis of the findings)

Code, Concepts and Categories – Stage 1
Focus Groups

Focus Groups

Focus Groups
Male 2: Double talk, being in a group. Different level of anxiety, Uncomfortable in group, Frustrated not being moment with a client. Adjusting the risk of integrating into the scientist practitioner model.

Focus Groups
Female 2: Being involved in group, Community, Being common in the group. Having an understanding of identity as a counselling psychologist.

Focus Groups
Male 1: Training and supervision impacts practice. Having hope in the profession, Identity / role as a scientist practitioner.

Focus Groups
Female 6: Constant worries, Worried about the quality of work. Worried about data analysis, Ability to write. Unsure about writing skills, Struggle with qualitative research.

Focus Groups
Female 5: Intense, Balancing placement, Pressured. Being involved in a group, Community, Being common in the group. Having an understanding of identity as a counselling psychologist.

Focus Groups
Female 6: Most stressful time of my life, Various worries, Participants recruitment, Anxious.
Female 2: Difficult, No set deadlines, Identity, Worried about others being ahead, Hard to meet deadlines

Female 3: Research aspects are random, Unpredictable, Availability of participants, Ethical clearances, Unable to complete doctorate independently

Female 4: Fluctuating feelings, Worry, Mixed feelings, Doing it because of no choice, Requirement

Female 1: Ethics procedure causes stress, Waiting process is stressful, Not in control, Unable to move thesis forward, Feeling stuck

Female 2: Overcoming different constraints, Worried about viability of thesis, Very hard, Requires hard work, Different challenges can get in the way

Female 3: Concept of research is stressful, Stress in how research is managed in the training programme, Training is stressful, Real work, Worried about the area exam, Worried thesis not being good enough, Needed three years of hard work, Unable to progress as a charted psychologist

Female 2: Making the thesis unique, Justifying thesis, Major challenge, Bad communication from university and tutors, Lack of time communication can be a challenge

Female 3: Vive, Not in a position to do anything, Lots of other commitments, Pressing and urgent, Not confident in academic

Female 4: Not relevant, Not very useful, Exist only, No relationship, Research topic does not influence practice, External/External to external trustworthiness of the study, Supportive colleagues

Female 1: Exploration, Turning into a researcher, Being in the moment with research, Curiosity, Integrating challenges, Uncomfortable, Having a research background, Going back to the research role, Finding it difficult to separate (research/practice)

Female 1: Research topic is very close to practice, Difficult role, Topic is aligned to practice, Divided, Separated, Interesting Relationship, still Emerging, Developing, Staying with the topic, Identity/Role, Clumsiness, Liberating, Exhausting, Experiencing in practice

Female 2: Theoretical/Researcher Role, No support, Helpless

Female 3: Difficult time, Supervisor relationship, Managing with the topic, Identity/Role, Clumsiness, Uncertain, Exist slightly, No relationship, Disinterest, Not the original topic,

Female 4: Exploration, Starting, Learning, Doing research, Being in the moment with research, Curiosity, Integrating challenges, Uncomfortable, Having a research background, Going back to the research role, Finding it difficult to separate (research/practice)

Female 1: Further knowledge base, Immersing, Being around in the area being researched, Various benefits, Managing to complete an extensive thesis, Immerging in the research process, Immerging in the topic

Female 1: Idea of curiosity, Interesting concept (research/practice), Ethical issues, Having a therapeutic curiosity, Recruiting participants

Female 3: Water replication in psychological practice, Understanding the interplay of research and practice, Work life balance, Understanding a thesis has helped understand compassionate focused model, Applying information in practice, Facilitating different therapeutic methodologies, influence study data and of future research

Female 3: Motivation, Finding a balance, University and college, University influence study data and findings, Still learning, Thesis interest getting spark in therapy, Dilemma in therapy room, Thesis vs research practice PhD vs Doctorate

Female 1: Time consuming, Supervisor availability, Getting feedback, Frustrating, Afraid that paper published are not about you, Afraid of getting caught out 

Female 4: Fluctuating feeling, Uncertain, Worried, Anxious, Forced, Wanting progress, Weeks of waiting, Difficult, Angry, Resentful

Female 5: Realised the importance of research, New research skills, Useful learning experiences, Positive experiences

Female 1: Time consuming, Going through university policies, Not in control, Delay in work, Put off, Loose interest, Unable to focus, Cannot progress

Female 6: Realised the importance of research, Research relates to practice and experience, consistently reflecting on practice and research
Reflection, A useful experiences

Female 5: Intend to write journal, Publish articles, Informing practice, Publish research, Contributing

Female 4: Writing issues, Stuck in writing of building a theory, Getting through the training,

Male 1: Limits in research because of the programme, Constricting nature of the course

Female 6: Wary, Ethical clearance being

Female 5: Struggle, Challenge on Unprepared, Had to quickly make opportunity in research, Interesting, Exploring

Female 4: Enormous task

Male 1: Time a crucial factor, Managing all aspects

Female 5: Problems in recruiting participants, Not passionate, Not doable

Female 3: Changing research questions, Manageable, Doable

Female 4: Composing your worst fear, Gaining control, Capture

Female 2: Reflects research, Teaching job, Reflecting in a qualitative research, Alternative future jobs Working in academic context, Being in clinical practice, Engaging in research

Female 3: More Skilful, Experienced, Test of endurance, Major achievement, Stronger

Male 2: Planning stage, Context, Questioning about the various stages, Initial stage, Taking risk taking one step at a time, Selecting methodology, Managing challenges, Learning process, Finding balance, Not being overwhelmed with decision making in research

Female 5: Having assurance, Access to vulnerable population, Disappointment in getting access

Focus Groups

Focus Groups

Focus Groups

Focus Groups

Focus Groups

Focus Groups

Focus Groups
Female 1: Self-learning, insightful process, Conducting interviews, Help to see how people practice. Health process, Carrying out interviews, Impacts practice, Derived a range of ideas for practice, Elements of thesis impacts practice. Produced ideas, Differences between reading research and practice.

Female 4: Finding common themes (practice and research), Process of research, Being curious.

Female 5: Listening to practice, Learning process, Discovery, Practice influences thesis.

Female 3: Thesis on how it impacts practitioner, Research link to practice, Strongly related.

Male 1: Personal experiences, Practice influences research, Evolves, Impacts on personal experiences.

Female 4: Doing it to get through, Ticking the box, Requirement, Not seeking any opportunity, No expectations.

Female 3: Personal experiences, Integrating research and practice, Personal live.

Male 2: Opportunity in research and practice, Synergistically (interdependent), Good opportunity for research interest, Develop research skills, Critical part as a practitioner.

Female 6: Opportunity to learn, Opportunity to get a job, Impacts family life, Impacts on personal level, Opportunity to learn, Inducing variety of opportunity, Excited, Enjoying the moment, Impacts on practice, Impacts on personal level, Opportunity to learn, Indulging variety of opportunity, Excited, Enjoying the moment, Impacts on practice, Opportunity of a job, Feeling hopeful, Insightful, Being naïve allows you to seek different opportunities.

Female 2: Uncertain, Unsure, At a different place, Not there right now.

Female 3: Completed a doctoral thesis, Hoping to complete a big project, Naïve, Slightly concerned about the future.

Male 1: Passing the doctorate, Never get this chance, Last opportunity.

Female 6: Appreciate, Enjoying the process, Hard, Lot of pressure, Fun.
Audit Trail

FOCUS GROUPS

Concepts & Categories – Stage 2

| Male 1: Dread, Worried, Overwhelmed, Not coping, Anxious, Fear, Easier if thesis was interesting/ exciting, Finding a balance doable, Managing everything else, Time, Fitting in everything |
| Male 2: Compulsory, Interested to be a practitioner psychologist, Requirement/ Mandatory, Something that have to be done, Ordeal, Title / Qualification, Need to do to get out of way, Not enjoyable process, Pain in the neck/ Painful, Need, No choice, option, Necessary evil, Requirement to pass the course. |
| Female 1: Detest, Similar attitude (requirement), Unnecessary, Hate learning, Not interested in thesis, No desire, Not excited, Not bothered, Not for me, Dry, Should not be part of the course, Lack of motivation, Dislike, Enjoy interviewing participants, Data analysis is a dry subject |
| Female 2: Enjoys, Interesting, Hard work, Uncertain about writing, Conducting a research is appealing, Not looking forward in writing, Research minded, Research is everything, Great opportunity, Research is applicable, Not good in writing, Unclear writing style, Expanding academics |
| Male 3: Integral, Identity as a counselling psychologist, Exciting, Should be integral, Passionate, Using practice scientist knowledge, Being a scientist practitioner, Fundamental, Benefits of quantitative research, Qualitative research is interesting, Tiring process, Wary of no evidence based practice, Demonstrating effectiveness, Personal thesis is a means of learning scientific knowledge |
| Male 2: Qualitative design fascinating, Very positive, Qualitative research is useful in the field of counselling psychology, Qualitative design is encouraged and applicable in any area, Reaching society / workplace. |
| Female 1: Doing a thesis is not necessary, Thesis don’t go anywhere, Unnecessary |
| Female 3: Enjoyable process, Being in the course because of the research aspects, Able to recognise useful research, Liberating, Important, Curiosity, Refreshing process, Interesting, Observing, Enriching, Sharpening research skills |
| Female 2: Worried, Difficult to gather information, Accessibility of the university, Concern, Uncertain, No access to the university library |
| Question Two: Challenges of undertaking a doctoral thesis |
| Male 1: Time, Fitting/ Managing everything, Finding time to do something for yourself, Managing the smallest assignments, Finding the right balance, Time Management, Leisure time/ Self Care, Organization skills |
| Female 1: Time, Balancing practice and research component, Thesis is personal, Work / Life Balance Tension, Procrastination, No luxury time |
| Male 2: Regret, Practice impacts thesis, Angry, Frustrated, Not comfortable/ Uneasiness, Lost of time in practice, Anxious, Using time productively, Managing other things apart from the thesis |
| Male 3: Relevant, Benefiting future, Thesis is building my practice, Self- care, Hoping that research skills will be useful in the future, Applicable/ Suitability in practice, Stress, Being a scientist – practitioner |
| Female 2: Pressure, Procrastination, Getting into zone, External stress, Family and domestic chores/ Family responsibilities, Family obligation, Burnout, Planning, Challenge in finding time, Time Management, Being strategic, Organization, Burden, Managing |
| Male 1: Anxiety management, Panic, Time management, Balance, Panicking, Regulate, Maintaining Time restraints, Peer Pressure, Insecurities, Frustration, Focus/ Keeping in track, Being current, Hearing other where their up too creates anxiety, Comparing with others, Others being ahead, Maintaining balance |
Male 2: Anxious, Time Frame, Worried, Pressure, Maintaining limited time, Managing everything, Analysing data, Writing up thesis, Not much time, Finding a balance and doing well in a short time frame, Manageable

Female 2: Fear, Deadline, Not Ready/ Unprepared, Pressure

Male 1: Time constrain, Balance, Manageable, Doable, Not doing something big

Male 3: Pressure, Writing (scientific writing is simple/elegant), Anxiety, Keeping things simple, Melt-down, Demanding

Female 2: Insecurity, Not very good at managing things, Sad, Dreadful, Hard/Though/Complex, Organizing skills, Difficult to focus, Need a block of time, Take days to write, Worried of not having time, Freaked out due to time, Procrastination, Feel full of anxiety

Male 3: Lack of time, Struggle with time, Need more time, Full of anxiety, Unmanageable, Strenuous.

Female 2: Having a goal, Meeting those goals

Female 1: Pressure/Heaviness, Still learning about the doctoral programme, Learning to do things differently, Anxious about viva, Worried, Scariest thing (viva exams), Tested in terms of knowledge Stressful, Catch 22/ feeling trapped, Tension, Force, Balancing, Being original, Pressure to be new, Need to be fancy, Keeping it simple, Dread, Producing a sophisticated knowledge

Male 3: Anxiety, Being able to communicate in viva, Hate exams, Hate being tested, Viva process is anxiety provoking, Anxiety around writing up, The process of completing a thesis is challenging

Male 2: Doubtful, Viva is a challenge to see whether your good enough, Worried of failing the viva

Male 3: Viva is about defending your argument

Male 2: Imposter syndrome/unable to internalize personal accomplishments, Self-esteem

Male 1: Argue your thesis, Defend your thesis, Plagiarism, Knowing the process and the different stages of your thesis, Viva is a test whether you have wrote your thesis

Female 2: Challenge in positioning thesis in the literature review

Male 2: Worried whether thesis is current, Worried whether thesis is relevant, Positioning thesis in the literature review

Male 1: Being able to argue your point (Viva exams), Defending your thesis, Viva is about testing your knowledge, Having an understanding

Male 3: Anxiety levels in class, Frustrated to see other people feeling anxious Anxiety breaths, Anxiety is not contained, Transference of anxiety, Difficult to manage transference of anxiety, Uncontrolled/Uncomfortable anxiety, Chaotic, Preparing/planning anxiety, External anxiety, Lack of motivation, Dynamic of the group creates anxiety, Disengaging from groups, anxiety should be contained

Female 3: Anxiety should be contained

Male 3: Same bloody conversation in a group, Anxiety in the group is a challenge in conducting research, Don’t want to get involved in a research group, Research group are waste of time, Not interested to hear about other people’s worries, Don’t want to hear the same worries again and again, Fills me with worry, Nicer if anxiety was contained

Female 1: Anxiety cannot be contained, More about how people feels

Male 2: Challenge being in a group, Different developmental stage, Communication at different level Incongruence, Imbalance in group, Clash in groups

Male 3: Same anxiety over and over again, Talking about anxiety, Frustrating talking about anxiety, Staff need to contain, Frustrated, Waste of time, Challenge in preparing thesis, Time could have been used productively, Using time wisely, Research groups are like group therapy on anxious, Managing anxiety, Feel worried hearing other people anxious, Responding to anxiety, Real challenge in preparing thesis

Male 1: Still developing, Uncertain but clinical practice impacts, Frustration with time, Limited time, Reading research improves work with client, Positive outcomes, Interesting relationship, Research does impacts practice, Happens frequently

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female 1: Strange, Still learning, Took a long time to integrate, Not being sacred to take risk, Challenge, Tension to integrate, Tension of leaving research behind, Challenge in integrating two components, Time consuming, Difficult integrating, Worried not being moment with a client, Adjusting/Difficulty in integrating to the scientist-practitioner model</th>
<th>Male 2: Influences, Integrating comes with practice, Evidence-base, Interesting relationship, Tension of balance, Reading research impacts practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female 1: New experiences, Knowledgeable, Interesting relationship, Creates confidence, Gain trust from clients, Still learning to integrate, Valuable, Pressure, Not being afraid/risky, Not afraid of integrating, Taking risk, Research is important</td>
<td>Male 2: Shaping identity, Identity of a trainee counselling psychologist, Identification of self, Pressure to shape identity around the scientist-practitioner model, Research is helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3: Level of experiences is crucial in shaping practice, Being a responsibly practitioner, Competition to prove yourself, Pressure, Pressure around formation of identity as a counselling psychologist</td>
<td>Male 3: Effective, Identity and value, Using evidence based in practice, Connected strongly, Research influences practice, Research is crucial in shaping the practice component, Valuable, Scientific stance, Evidence-base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3: Level of experiences is crucial in shaping practice, Being a responsibly practitioner, Competition to prove yourself, Pressure, Pressure around formation of identity as a counselling psychologist</td>
<td>Male 2: Interesting relationship, Challenging process, Cautious research, Other factors impact practice (Extra therapeutic activity), Intervention and techniques impact practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3: Research impacts practice, Having a role model in training, Scientist-practitioner model, struggle fitting in the model, Challenge to integrate research/practice, Promote the link between research and practice, Tutors should link research and practice, Hard to link research and practice, New baby profession, New programme, New role models, Having external speakers, Difficult in creating identity, Having a role model will be easier</td>
<td>Male 1: Training and supervision impacts practice, Having hope in the profession, Identity/role as a counselling psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 3: Research impacts practice, Evidence based practice, Evidence based, Practice should be evidence based, Psycho-education impacts practice, Practice is shaped by theory, Demonstrated in writing, (research impacts practice), Personal experiences and research impacts practice, Scientist-practitioner, Integrating</td>
<td>Male 3: Research based practice, Evidence based, Practice should be evidence based, Psycho-education impacts practice, Practice is shaped by theory, Demonstrated in writing, (research impacts practice), Personal experiences and research impacts practice, Scientist-practitioner, Integrating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3: Reflects our identity, Pressure, Pressure being a trainee</td>
<td>Female 2: Unclear with relationship, Uncertain how research impacts practice, Therapeutic relationship/alliance are important, Having a balance in integrating two components, Managing balance, Research is important, Interesting process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 3: Scientist-practitioner, Identity struggle, New profession, Research benefits the therapeutic process, Scientist-practitioner, Working ethically, Identity as a new profession</td>
<td>Female 3: Reflects our identity, Pressure, Pressure being a trainee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 2: Ethically integrating research and practice, Communicating research, Transferring research and practice in therapy</td>
<td>Male 3: Therapeutic relationship, Having a relationship with research, An attitude to integrate two components, Being versed in the language of research, Research is important for practice, Research makes therapy works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 3: Therapeutic relationship, Having a relationship with research, An attitude to integrate two components, Being versed in the language of research, Research is important for practice, Research makes therapy works</td>
<td>Female 1: Uncertain, Haven’t at the moment, Unaware, Not experience before, Can't perceive any opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 1: Closer to get doctorate title, New skills, Evidence of efficacy, Upgrade CV, Extra skills for CV, Strengthen application jobs, Employment, Wide variety of job opportunities, Publishing</td>
<td>Male 2: Proficient, Develop/expand writing skills, Being eloquent in writing, Improving communication skills, Interchangeable in the practice/research component, Being able to translate research into practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 2: Being involved in a group community, Expand knowledge, Giving something to parents</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Male 3: Personal development, Specialist knowledge, Going deeper into self, Make parents proud, Self-awareness

Female 3: Being specialist, Giving something to the family, Opportunity in variety of things

Female 2: Stressful
Female 3: Stress, Juggling, Managing research with other work
Female 6: Most stressful time of my life, Various worries, Participants recruitment, Anxious
Female 4: Work that needs attention, Shorter deadlines, Pressing, Limited time, Urgent, Thesis has a longer deadline
Female 1: No sense of urgency, Thesis happening in the future, Worried about the panel, Hard to balance with everything else
Female 2: Hard to balance, Time frame, Getting motivation to start, Worried, Lack of confidence
Female 5: Different experiences to a professional doctorate, Felt contracted, Smaller time frame, Smaller sample, Meaningful process, Useful for professional practice
Female 4: Regret in choosing a research topic quickly, Not in love with research topic, Not passionate, Unable to change topic, Frustrating, Regret
Female 2: Falling out of love with research topic, A chore, Shame, Sense of regret, Balancing, Challenge to immerse yourself in research
Female 3: Managing everything, Hectic, Meeting deadlines, Difficult, Stressful, Balancing
Female 5: Intense, Balancing placement, Pressured
Female 6: Constant worries, Worried about the quality of work, Worried about data analysis, Ability to write, Unsure about writing skills, Struggle with qualitative research
Female 2: Difficult, No set deadlines, Identity, Worried about others being ahead, Hard to meet deadlines
Female 3: Difficult, Stressful, Managing everything,
Female 2: Anxiety provoking, Being behind others, Better structure
Female 3: Research aspects are random, Unpredictable, Availability of participants, Ethical clearances, Unable to complete doctorate independently
Female 1: Stress on unpredictable factors, Unexpected / unforeseen events, Waiting for ethical procedure, Frustrating, Unable to progress, Have to wait for certain things to fall in place, Feeling stuck
Female 2: Time consuming, Going through university policies, Not in control, Delay in work, Put off, Loose interest, Unable to focus, Cannot progress
Female 4: Put it off, Delay in universities responds, Procrastination, Uncertain, Uncomfortable feeling, Scary feeling, Big research, Easier to put off, Waiting for feedback, Using unhelpful strategies to avoid the thesis, Avoiding, Alliance with supervisor, Disinterest
Female 2: Selection of topic, Multiple challenges, Hard work
Female 4: Fluctuating feelings, Worry, Mixed feelings, Doing it because of no choice, Requirement
Female 1: Ethics procedure causes stress, Waiting process is stressful, Not in control, Unable to move thesis forward, Feeling stuck
Female 4: Fulfilling the requirement, Good supervision, Talking to each other about thesis is helpful
Female 2: Overcoming different constraints, Worried about viability of thesis, Very hard, Requires hard work, Different challenges can get in the way
Female 4: Feasibility, Conducting interviews, Constrain, Doing what is told, Obligatory process, Falling out of love, Aggravating, Nightmare
Female 2: Not passionate, Changed topic several times, Selection of topic, Disinterest, Not the original topic, Altering thesis, Feasible
Female 3: Stress, Viva Exam, Worry, Maintain a positive relationship, Level of motivation
Female 5: Personal circumstances, Various pressure, Difficult time, Coping with the real and difficult emotions, Personal grief (death/ grief)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female 5:</th>
<th>Difficult time, Supportive family, Balance of love and laughter, Attend to tacit knowledge, Inter – rater reliability to enhance trustworthiness of the study, Supportive colleagues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female 3:</td>
<td>Concept of research is stressful, Stress in how research is managed in the training programme, Training is stressful, Hard work, Worried about the viva exams, Worried thesis not being good enough, Wasted three years of hard work, Unable to progress as a charted psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4:</td>
<td>Supervisor relationship difficult to manage, Procrastination, No choice to select a supervisor, Trying to get what you need from supervisor is challenging, Sense of not being in control, Difficult, Angry, Resentful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3:</td>
<td>Not in control, External challenges, Juggling, Balance between practice and research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 2:</td>
<td>Time consuming, Supervisor availability, Waiting to get feedback, Long waiting process to get feedback, Frustrating, Lack of communication between supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1:</td>
<td>Selection of topic, Appropriate topic, Engaging with philosophy &amp; epistemology, Trying to work out the literature review, Situating the literature review, Framing research questions, Finding a fit in the profession, Understanding the profession, Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 2:</td>
<td>Making the thesis unique, Justifying thesis, Major challenge, Bad communication from university and tutors, Lack of time communication can be a challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4:</td>
<td>Nightmare, Multiple challenges, Aggravating, Frustrating, Procrastination, No responds from supervisor, No support, Helpless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3:</td>
<td>Viva, Not in a position to do anything, Loads of other commitments, Pressing and urgent, Not confident in academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1:</td>
<td>Ethical procedure was stressful, Waiting, Unable to progress, Mixed feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4:</td>
<td>Fluctuating feeling, Uncertain, Worry, Anxiety, Forced, Waiting process, Weeks of waiting, Difficult, Angry, Resentful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3:</td>
<td>Motivation, Finding a balance, University procedure, Not given much notice, Fortunate, Managing deadlines, Managing the thesis process, Difficulty in managing two components: research and practice PhD vs Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4:</td>
<td>Nightmare, Aggravating, Challenge in undertaking a thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4:</td>
<td>Not relevant, Not very much, Uncertain, Exist slightly, No relationship, Research topic does not influence practice, Tenuous, Sense of regret, Thesis does not seem relevant to practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3:</td>
<td>Separate relationship, Struggle, Doctoral thesis and practice don’t seem to come together Research in general does influences practice, Theory influences practice, Lack of time, Looking more at theory, clinical theory and therapeutic interventions, No clear idea on how research informs practice, Using research to inform practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1:</td>
<td>Research topic is very close to practice, Difficult role, Topic is aligned to practice, Divorced / Separated, Interesting Relationship, Still Emerging, Developing, Staying with the topic, Identity/ Role, Clumsiness, Liberating, Exhausting, Experiencing in practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1:</td>
<td>Exploration, Turning into a researcher, Being in the moment with research, Curiosity, Integrating challenge, Uncomfortable, Having a research background, Going back to the research role, Finding it difficult to separate (research/practice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3:</td>
<td>Curiosity element, Uncertain, Research ideas emerge during practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1:</td>
<td>Uncertain about reflective practitioner, Still learning, Thesis interest getting spark in therapy, Dilemma in therapy room, thesis vs practice, Understanding the relationship, Identity/Role, Similarity, Interesting relationship (practice/research)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4:</td>
<td>Topic not related to practice, Challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1:</td>
<td>Being curious, Wanting to explore, Making sense of research and practice component, Learning about theory and practice, Integrating both research and practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1: Uncomfortable research and practice, Doctoral course is about bringing in two components (research/practice)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 3: Idea of curiosity, Interesting concept (research/practice), Ethical issues, Having a therapeutic curiosity, Recruiting participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 1: Knowing and understanding concepts, Being aware of the outcomes, Facilitating research and practice, Therapeutic curiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 3: Research and practice are similar, Bringing in together two components (research/practice)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 5: Wider application in psychological practice, Understanding the interplay of research and practice, Work life balance, Undertaking a thesis has helped understand compassionate mind focussed therapy, Applies informs practice, Noticing different therapeutic modalities influence study data and findings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 6: Realised the importance of research, Research relates to practice and experiences, consistently reflecting on practice and research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 1: Further Knowledge base, Immersing, Being versed in the area being researched, Various benefits, Managing to complete an extensive thesis, Immersing in the research process, Immer sing in the topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 4: New research skills, Useful learning experiences, Positive experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 2: Demonstrating resilience, Uncertain about the future, Managing balance, Ability to juggle, Cannot foresee opportunities, Anxious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 4: Conquering your worst fear, Gaining control, Capture</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 6: Understanding research better, Informing practice, Publish research, Contributing to evidence based practice</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1: Stamina, Endurance, Encouraging critical thinking in research/practice, Knowing what is relevant, Hard to think about an opportunity beyond viva, Getting through viva, Worried about the viva, Stress</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4: Platform for doing further research, A starting point, Uncertain about the direction, Unknown, Hope, Opportunity to work in university</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1: Provide a platform for reflective practitioner, Working in academic context, A clear identity/role in counselling psychology, Continuous profession, Finding out how research fits within counselling profession, Capacity to self-reflection, A useful experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3: Reflects research, Teaching job, Reflecting in a qualitative research, Alternative future jobs, Working in academic context, Being in clinical practice, Engaging in research</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3: More Skilful, Experienced, Test of endurance, Major achievement, Stronger</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 5: Intend to write journal, Publish articles, Useful to practice components, Conducting training programmes, Try to resonate with readers, Publishing, Being inspired, Being motivated</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1: Feel fortunate doing a doctoral programme, Talking about research appears to be helpful, Interacting with other people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 3: Developing new research skills, Long opportunity in research, Interesting, Exploring opportunity, Research alternative to practice, Useful, Being able to move forward, Experience of building a theory, Getting through the training, Getting over the thesis, Celebrating</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 6: No experiences, Still learning, Naïve</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 5: Accessibility to participants, Challenging, Difficulty in recruiting participants, Unexpected difficulty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 2: Planning stage, Curiosity, Questioning about the various stages, Initial stage, Taking risk, Taking one step at a time, Selecting methodology, Managing challenges, Learning process, Finding balance, Not being overwhelmed with decision making in research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 4: Throwing yourself, Getting involved, Not worrying, Being flexible, Exploring, Not being stuck</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 5: Having assurance, Access to vulnerable population, Disappointment in getting access</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 6: Wary, Ethical clearance being a nightmare, Uncertainty, Early stage</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female 3: Ethical clearance being a nightmare, Lack of time, Not passionate, Still interested, Not the original thesis that was intended to do</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 4: Writing issues, Stuck in writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Male 2: Balance, Being passionate, Doable, Struggling with recruiting participants  
Female 3: Lack of time, Limited time  
Male 1: Time a crucial factor, Managing all aspects of the doctoral course, Getting it done, Worried about panel, Being current, Being passionate about thesis, Difficulty in balancing  
Male 2: Doing a passionate research topic, Enjoying the thesis process, Not wanting to regret  
Female 3: Clearing ethical issues, Worried  
Female 5: Problems in recruiting participants, Not passionate, Not doable  
Female 3: Changing research questions, Manageable, Doable  
Female 4: Enormous task  
Female 1: Comparing PhD and doctorate  
Male 1: Difficult to retain focus, Juggling, Managing everything else  
Female 3: More work, Hard work, Not a focussed piece, Managing various components  
Female 4: Supervision is crucial, Refining thesis, Having a trustworthy supervisor, Feeling safe in completing thesis, Having guidance  
Female 2: Supervisor, Trusting a supervisor, Reliable supervisor  
Female 4: Making it simple / simplistic, Passion is not necessary, Refining thesis  
Female 5: Challenge in writing, Producing a thesis, Supervision being critical, Structure of the thesis Time consuming, Boring, Draining, Passionate in methodology  
Female 1: Chapter / subheading of the thesis, Writing being an issue, Epistemology concerns, Worried, Process of reflectivity, Process of thinking, Structuring, Editing, Process of writing, Passion  
Female 4: Formulating the thesis, Trying to find out a formula, Completing a thesis, Passion is not helpful, Distraction of completing a thesis  
Female 2: Research design, Selection of methodology, Retaining passion, Passionate in methodology  
Female 1: Bad experiences with supervisor, Frightening process, Trusting supervisor, Concern of the Viva, Reliable supervisor, Mixed messages from supervisor  
Female 5: Pressured to come up with research topic quickly, Making quick decisions, No sufficient time to reflect, Deadlines, Time pressures, Stressful  
Female 4: Struggle, Challenge on what to focus, Requirement of the course  
Female 5: Struggle, Challenge on what to focus on, Various things to focus on the course  
Male 1: Deadlines, Pressure, Need more time, Structure of the programme  
Female 6: Clueless, Upset, Unprepared, Had to quickly make a decision on a research topic  
Female 4: Politics, The unsaid, Research ideas should follow certain protocol  
Female 2: Power, Overcoming challenges, Pleasing the examiners, Facing viva, Could not do a quantitative research, No support Relying on self, Really prove yourself Struggling  
Female 4: Pressured by supervisor, Pressured completing a thesis, Hard to be a free spirit  
Female 5: Decision making on methodology, Data analysis was too big  
Female 2: Structure in methodology, Data analysis was too big  
Female 3: Relieve after completing a thesis, Freedom, Getting the thesis done  
Male 2: Power issues, Fulfilling requirements  
Male 1: Limits in research because of the programme, Constricting nature of the course  
Female 6: Survival, Curious to know when the anxiety builds up, Feeling still naïve, Worried  
Female 2: Money/Finance  
Female 1: Balancing everything, Work, Money, Family, Assignments, Practice placements, Huge list Thesis, Deadlines  
Female 3: Insufficient time, Challenge in managing everything, Doing things in the last moment Stress, Pressure, Unable to breath, Never ending process  
Male 1: Isolating process, Endless, Fear  
Female 2: Huge process, Long process, Hard to manage, Overwhelmed by the workload, Finding a balance, Never ending process  
Female 4: Writing issues, Inability to enjoy, Feeling guilty in enjoying, Not affecting mental health issues, Self-care is difficult, Modelling self – care
Female 5: Time management, Exhausting process, Shattered, Being ill, Learning to pace yourself, Being sensible, Challenge to remain calm
Female 4: Hard, Difficult, No deadline
Male 2: Competition with others/classmates, Afraid of being behind, Worried
Female 4: Increase anxiety when talking to others about thesis, Not very useful, Anxiety, Creates anxiety
Female 1: Overwhelming, Massive guilt, Thesis hanging over you all the time, Horrible black cloud Burden, Stress, Really hard to have a good time, Issue with procrastination, Procrastination feeds into guilt
Female 2: Worried, Someone ahead of you, Managing anxiety, Having an understanding, Challenge in making decision, Inability to deal with things, Feeling stuck
Male 2: Graduation, Motivated to graduate
Female 2: Unable to graduate, Feeling behind, A block, A problem, Impacts your anxiety, Impacts mood, Being behind, Not ahead of others, Being pressured
Female 4: Hectic, Unstructured programme, Nature of the training, Anxiety comes anytime, Difficult to get things done, Affected my sense of boundaries
Female 5: Collecting data is a big impact, Different people will be at different stage, Availability and access
Female 4: Comparing self to another, Constant changes, Endless, Frustrated, Various pressures
Female 6: Being original, Taking risk, Anxiety provoking, Original, Risky, A lot to juggle, Challenge Hard
Female 3: Ethical clearance, High risk research, Unable to graduate, Endless process, Worried
Female 4: Uncertainty, Managing the uncertainty
Male 2: Rising to the challenges, Pushing yourself, Learning
Female 4: Not being paid to do research, Money, Being paid can be a motivation, Self-care, Time consuming, Lack of time, Getting paid
Male 2: Balance, Finding balance, Getting a job in research
Female 3: Lack of opportunity in research training
Female 2: Family commitments, Harder to balance, More difficult
Female 5: Guilt, Family commitment, Difficult to self-care, Family commitments, Emotionally challenging, Lack of energy, Very hard
Male 1: Balancing things, Sense of regret unable to do a bigger research, No time, Lack of time, Being pragmatic, Lack of opportunity, Completing a thesis
Female 5: Lack of time, Insufficient time, Commitments to friends/families, Neglecting friends and families, Frustration, Hurt
Female 4: Time as a challenge, Guilt, Family stress, Using time wisely, Not feeling isolated
Female 5: Multi-tasking, Having many responsibilities, Family commitments
Female 4: Balance, Constant pressure, Maintaining the quality of relationship, Quality of relationship
Female 3: Hard, Family commitments
Male 1: Conceptualizing, Delivering quality practice, Constantly reviewing, Big component, Big relationship, Strong relationship
Female 6: Research topic relates to practice, Thesis topic influenced by practice, Practice impacts thesis, Practice impacts research topic, Motivating
Female 5: Personal experiences, Fascinated, Personal experiences impacts thesis
Female 1: Naive, Not much of experiences, Still learning, Thesis does not influence practice
Female 4: Wanted to be part of the thesis, Thesis is part of me, Using self in the thesis, Bring two components together, Thesis informs practice, Being in the moment, Thesis is affecting professional practice
Female 2: Doing interview, Talking to people, Communicating, Impacts therapy skills, Increase confidence, Interview is very similar to therapy, Subjective experiences

Female 1: Still learning, Insightful process, Conducting interviews help to see how people practice Helpful process, Carrying out interviews impacts practice, Found a range of ideas for practice, Elements of thesis impacts practice, Produced ideas, Differences between reading research and practising

Female 4: Finding common theme (practice and research), Process of research, Being curious

Female 5: Listening to practice, Learning process, Discovery, Practice influences thesis

Female 3: Thesis on how it impacts practitioner, Research link to practice, Strongly related

Male 1: Personal experiences, Practice influences research, Evolves, Impacts on personal experiences

Female 3: Personal experiences, Integrating research and practice, Personal live

Female 4: Doing it to get through, Ticking the box, Requirement, Not seeking any opportunity, No expectations

Female 3: Interested to pursue in research, Enjoy the research component, Enjoyable process

Good opportunity in academic, Opportunity in research areas

Male 1: Opportunity in research and practice, Synergistically (interdependent), Good opportunity for research interest, Develop research skills, Critical part as a practitioner

Female 6: Opportunity to learn, Opportunity to get a job, Impacts family life, Impacts on different areas, Impacts on professional level, Impacts on personal level, Opportunity to learn, Indulging Variety of opportunity, Excited, Enjoying the moment, Impacts on practice, Opportunity of a job Feeling hopeful, Insightful, Being naïve allows you to seek different opportunities

Female 2: Uncertain, Unsure, At a different place, Not there right now

Female 3: Completed a doctoral thesis, Hope, Developed research skills, Title and qualification, Able to complete a big project, Naïve, Slightly concern about the future

Female 4: Guilt, Pressure, Luxury, Various opportunity, Fortunate, Appreciation of opportunity

Female 5: No longer feeling burden, Hard, Feeling fortunate, Not realised the opportunity

Female 4: Anxiety of not getting qualify, Not getting a job, Anxious about the future, Anxious about decision making

Male 1: Passing the doctorate, Never get this chance, Last opportunity

Female 6: Appreciate, Enjoying the process, Hard, Lot of pressure, Fun
Audit Trail - Stage 3: Core Categories and subcategories

Core Category 1: Obstacles in completing a thesis

Subcategory: Unhelpful emotions

Concepts:
- Fearful experience
- Anxiety of fitting in everything
- Worried (Viva, Others being ahead, Other people feeling anxious, Data analysis)
- Frustration (lack of understanding by others, unable to change the topic)
- Guilt (To enjoy, spending time in irrelevant activities, in self-care)
- Disappointment (delay in feedback)
- Stress (waiting for feedback, things you cannot foresee, time managing, about the future)

Subcategory: Demanding Nature of a Thesis

- Challenge in recruiting participants
- Qualitative research design
- Uncertain about methodology
- Epistemology / philosophy concern
- Managing other assignments
- Integrating research & practice component
- Hard to meet deadlines
- Pressure of time

Subcategory: Personal difficulties or obstacles

- Procrastination
- Unexpected circumstances
- Not enjoyable
- Lack of motivation
- Maintaining self-care
- Uncertain about the thesis topic
- Inability to focus
- Lack of confidence in writing
- Balance personal life and work
- Family responsibilities

Subcategory: Forming an identity

- Uncertainty
- Needing a role model
- Insufficient time in developing identity
- Lack of experiences
Subcategory: *Ineffective Supervisory Relationship*

- Delay in feedback
- University guidelines / Structure of the course (Ticking the box)
- Unable to change the topic
- Quality of work
- Power
- Lack of communication

**Core Category 2: Positive perspectives towards undertaking a thesis**

Subcategory: *Acquiring New Experiences*

- Understanding the scientist-practitioner model
- Reflective researcher
- New research skills (judging the quality of a paper,
- Informing practice (Evidence-based practice, thesis impacts practice)
- Develop writing skills

Subcategory: *Job opportunity*

- Better chances of employment
- Publishing
- Opportunity in research
- Specialists in the field

Subcategory: *Sense of achievement*

- Closer to get a doctorate title
- Being inspired and motivated
- Sense of awareness
- Positive outlook for the future
- Managed to complete an extensive thesis
- Sense of identity

Subcategory: *Creating a supportive network*

- Building a good relationship with supervisor
- Supportive family and friends
# Audit Trail: Stage 4 – Core category and subcategories

## Core categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Core category 1: Obstacles in completing a thesis</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Unhelpful emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Fear</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Frustration</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Guilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Demanding Nature of a Thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Challenges in recruiting participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Methodology, epistemology and philosophy concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Difficulty in meeting deadlines</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Difficulty in deciding research topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Personal Difficulties</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Procrastination</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Unexpected circumstances</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Lack of interest and motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Maintaining self-care</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Lack of experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Lack of confidence in writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Social Isolation</td>
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<td>● Difficulty in integrating research and practice</td>
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<td>● Difficulty in balancing academics, personal life and family responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Lack of Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Ineffective supervisory relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Delay in feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Problems with university guidelines</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

## Core Category 2: Positive perspective towards undertaking a thesis
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) Acquiring new experiences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Understanding the scientist-practitioner model</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Developing new research skills</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2) New Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Career prospects</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Specialising in a field</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Publishing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3) Sense of achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Attaining a doctorate title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Being inspired and motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Forming an identity</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>4) Creating a supportive network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Building a good relationship with supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Supportive family and peers</td>
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</table>
Audit Trail – Experiences of participants in the focus groups

Experiences of participants in the focus groups

- Good vibe
- Nervous
- Anxious about the Viva and handing in the thesis
- Help to consolidate ideas
- Helpful process
- Helpful to talk about research
- Manage to talk about research
- Learning process
- Learning new things
- Exploration and learning
- Maintaining the passion and reflexivity
- Thought provoking
- Interesting
- Provoking mixed feelings (excitement vs stress)
- Not feeling alone
- Learning process
- Thought provoking
Appendix F

Posters (Creative process of grounded theory)